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I'd Rather Have a Cat Than a Harem!

Reincarnated into the
World of an Otome Game
as a Cat-loving Villainess

KOSUZU HINANO
KOBATO CHANO





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I'd Rather Have a Cat than a Harem! Reincarnated into the World of an
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Chapter 1: The Music Recital

STUDENT recitals were held in the Royal Academy's music hall, which looked just like an ordinary theater. Rows of seats were staggered at an incline in front of a raised stage, and a dazzling magical light illuminated the performers, just like a spotlight.

The students from music class were each taking turns performing in the middle of the stage. Amy Northland had snagged the "good spot" (ground floor, near the front, middle of the row) and was eagerly awaiting her friend Rosalind's turn.

Amy sat next to her other friend Letizia, who looked prim and unconcerned, and beside Letizia sat her fiancé, the exchange student from the Kingdom of Bakr, Prince Jahal.

"You should have just sat in the royal box, Jahal," Letizia grumbled during a quiet moment between performances, glancing up at the royal box on the second floor. "It's harder on your guards down here."

Guards tried to give royal students some distance whenever possible, but today they sat with the prince and the girls sandwiched between them. On the plus side, however, Amy and Letizia also fell under their protective gaze, effectively silencing the usual nasty comments that would normally be loudly whispered about Amy.

"I could never dream of such a thing, Letty, even if requested from your fine lips! It's meaningless to even consider sitting apart when we could sit together!" Jahal said grandiosely, grabbing Letizia's hand and pressing his lips against it as if it were the most natural course of action.

"P-Prince Jahal!"

"I am allowed some freedom while I'm studying abroad. I can sit up there if *you* come with me, Letty..."

"I-I will most certainly not!"

Although you could see the stage perfectly from the royal box, which was currently empty, everyone in the audience got a clear view of you, too.

Letizia couldn't even imagine the PDA her overly affectionate fiancée would try if the two of them sat in the royal box alone. She quickly snatched her hand back.

"You two certainly get along well!" Amy teased, smiling.

Letizia turned to Amy, cheeks flushing bright red.

"You're just feeling bold because Prince Edward isn't here!"

It was true—Rosalind and Alexander were missing because they were going to perform together on stage, but Edward was conspicuously absent, too.

Even though Edward was a student at the Royal Academy, he didn't come to every music recital, so it would've caused a bit of a fuss if it were openly known the Third Prince was coming to *this* one. To avoid any excessive special treatment, Edward was watching from the staff seats offstage, out of sight from both the audience and the performers.

It must be hard, being royalty, Amy thought, not for the first time.

"Anyway," Amy continued, "which performances have you enjoyed most so far, Letty?"

"Hm... I quite liked the countertenor's falsetto from the second performance."

"...I'm going to be as tall as that guy before long, you know," Jahal interjected.

"I-I was talking about the singing, not the person!"

"Really?" Jahal asked. "That's good. If you were saying you liked that type of guy, I would've been in a bit of a pickle."

"Wh-What are you *even* talking about?"

Jahal's fine lips were upturned in a smirk, but his black eyes had a haughty gleam to them, contradicting his lighthearted tone.

"Oh! She just made you jealous, didn't she?" Amy chimed in.

"Amy!" groaned Letizia. "I've had it! With *both* of you!"

Jahal snorted at Amy's blunt question, instantly dispelling the fog of suspicion that had rolled in on him.

Amy smiled at the two of them.

They really do get along, after all, she thought. *It's so much fun being able to watch something together and then discuss it afterward. I do love talking with other people about the things I like... Music, animals...*

I wonder which performance Ed enjoyed the most?

Amy had only felt brave enough to tease Letizia because

Edward wasn't with them, but she still found herself wishing Edward could be there, watching the performances with her.

"What's the matter, Amy?"

"O-Oh, nothing. I'm fine," Amy said, giving her head a little shake. She was surprised that her thoughts had drifted in that direction.

"It'll be Rosalind's turn soon, right, Letty?" Amy asked.

"That's right," Letizia replied. "I really hope Alec doesn't get in her way."

"What do you mean? Is Alec bad at piano?"

"I'm not worried about his skill. I'm worried he'll throw her off mentally."

Rosalind was reserved and modest in all aspects of her life—Alexander was the exact opposite.

The news that the two of them would be performing together at this recital had caught like wildfire around the school, and Rosalind seemed very uncomfortable with all the attention she was inevitably attracting. But with every day that passed with Alexander rounding her up for practice at every opportunity, Rosalind became visibly more exhausted, and the looks of jealousy and envy turned into looks of pity.

"That reminds me... Alec told her to use one of his family's violins, and he gave her this really amazing one. She was white as a sheet when she told me!" Amy exclaimed.

"He did...? Hmm, I see..."

Letizia seemed to be implying something by her expression, but before Amy could ask what it was, the next performance started, and Amy quickly closed her mouth.

The soprano belted, accompanied by a piano, her voice reverberating throughout the hall. The technical aspects of her performance might not have met professional standards, but her dynamic, sweet voice was surprising, coming from a student.

Amy was bowled over in amazement. Even the average student at the Royal Academy was much more accomplished in the arts and music than the students in her previous life.

But perhaps she couldn't make sweeping comparisons like that. After all, even in her past life, there had been historical periods where classical concerts were wildly popular among the masses, and classical performers were regarded as celebrities.

Amy watched the performance with rapt attention when

suddenly she noticed a figure in the wings, ever so slightly peeking out at the audience.

Rosalind? Amy wondered. *But that's not the right dress...*

The dress sleeve that had caught her eye was a beautiful, brilliant orange color, not the subdued beige dress Rosalind had said she was going to wear.

As Amy's heart pounded in anticipation for the performance to come, she returned her attention to the final part of the coloratura melody.



THE performance scheduled just before Rosalind's had begun. Because the stage was designed to project sound out toward the audience, the music sounded quite distant from where she stood waiting in the wings, despite her close proximity.

Rosalind heard her classmate's singing voice, which seemed different than usual, and let out another sigh.

"You don't have to be so nervous," came a voice from behind her.

"And who's fault is it that I'm nervous?!" she hissed back in a whisper.

"You can blame me as much as you like, if it makes you feel better," teased Alexander, grinning and shrugging his shoulders.

"Don't mind if I do!" Rosalind snapped, but Alexander cheerfully brushed this spat off, as well.

Rosalind had become totally accustomed to this back-and-forth during the past few weeks they spent rigorously practicing together, and when she'd let her guard down, she nearly treated him as casually as she would a brother.

Rosalind had managed to keep it in check, but she also got the sense that Alexander would welcome it, so she was a little uncertain about where they'd stand from here on out.

"I'm holding a violin expensive enough to buy a mansion with, I'm wearing a dress more magnificent than I've ever worn before, and I'm performing with the son of the Duke of Coverdale. I'd be crazy *not* to be nervous!"

"You think? You really don't have to worry—that violin has been lying around the house for ages, and that dress looks really

good on you. You should wear stuff like that more often.”

“All I want is my credits for this class! No points are given for looking flashy!”

Rosalind let out a deep, exasperated sigh, but Alexander only grinned wider. She slumped her shoulders at his devil-may-care attitude.

“Who could have imagined that the same Alec that all the girls go ga-ga over was really like...this?”

“What do you mean ‘like this’? I’m me. *I’m like this.*”

“I’m not really in the mood to play semantics.”

“Well, I didn’t think the daughter of the Earl of Knowles would be like this either, so the feeling is mutual.”

With their position so close to the stage, the two had been trying to keep their voices down and had inadvertently been drawing closer to one another.

Rosalind suddenly returned to her senses and quickly took a few steps back, remembering how improper their proximity was for a young man and woman who weren’t even engaged to one another.

Seeing this, Alexander grinned and tried to hide his quiet laughter.

They really both took each other by surprise.



ON that day at the lounge, Rosalind had been half-dragged out of the terrace by Alexander to go talk to her professor, but the process of changing her performance partner had actually gone incredibly smoothly.

In fact, her music professor had even taken her aside and expressed his appreciation for her getting such a catch.

Apparently, Alexander’s performances were brilliant, he had a dedicated fanbase, and had enough talent to be the centerpiece of any social salon.

But there was no way Rosalind, who rarely played violin in public and had not debuted in society yet, could have known that.

Afterward, Alec had insisted they get together to practice right away. Rosalind had assumed they would go to one of the school’s private study rooms, but instead, they boarded a carriage and went

straight to the duke's estate. Rosalind had been there several times before to visit Portia, but this time she was led right by the cat room and taken to the music room.

As Rosalind was disorientated in astonishment, Alexander instructed her to play. Before she could fully gather her wits about her, she readied her violin and started playing the piece.

"Hm..." Alexander hummed once she had finished. "There's no problems overall, although it'd probably be best to make the accented notes stand out more while playing in the recital hall. And *that* won't do," he added, looking at her instrument.

"Is something wrong with my violin?"

"It's too shabby to be on the same stage as me."

Rosalind bristled inwardly at his nonchalantly tossed insult.

Her violin had been a hand-me-down from her aunt, and it certainly didn't cost much originally, but she still didn't think he should call it *shabby*. The Knowles family wasn't wealthy enough to spend a fortune on musical instruments, nor did the Earl of Knowles have any interest in music.

"You're not untalented, so I want you to have a richer sound. Here—"

"Wha—oh!"

The violin she was holding was plucked out of her hand and casually replaced with the one Alexander suggested.

Wh-What in the world?! Rosalind thought, trembling.

The violin was indisputably the work of a master craftsman. The very pattern of the wood grain was impressive, and the bow was incredibly easy to hold.

After being prompted to play again, she struck at the string with her bow despite her confusion. The notes spilled out from the instrument, almost as if the bow were magically pulling them out. Rosalind couldn't believe her ears.

The same person was playing the same notes as before, but it sounded like a completely different song.

Rosalind moved the bow as if intoxicated by the deep resonance. Before she knew it, Alexander had joined her on the piano.

The sounds blended so well together that it seemed impossible this was their first time playing together. Coupled with the beauty of the melody, it made Rosalind drift off into a trance.

Only after the song had finished did Rosalind realize that the

other servants had stopped by and listened to them play, thanks to the butler who'd tactfully and quietly opened the door to the music room.

The resounding applause that followed dragged Rosalind back to reality. She shrunk back in embarrassment, hoping the ground would swallow her up.

"I never expected you to put on such a beautiful and joyful performance, young master!" exclaimed the butler. "You live and learn, I suppose!"

"What are you talking about, Gramps? I always play like this."

"No, indeed! Today's performance had a special charm to it. And I must thank you as well, miss!"

"N-No, I didn't do anything..."

"All right, that's enough. We're going to take a break in the other room, so go get things ready."

All the servants left to follow his instructions, leaving only Rosalind, Alexander, and the butler alone in the music room.

"Um..." Rosalind said, "thanks for everything."

"Sure. It's mostly in good shape, don't you think? We'll just be doing fine-tuning from here on out."

"It needs fine tuning?" asked Rosalind, shocked.

She had assumed they didn't need to practice anymore unless they really wanted to. Alexander had struck her as the type of person who didn't have much passion for things in general and wouldn't waste his time on anything that he thought was pointless.

"If we're going to perform, we've got to blow their socks off."

"If you say so..."

"Don't you want to leave Amy and Ed speechless?" he asked with a self-satisfied grin and a wink that practically sparkled.

At that moment, for whatever reason, the pieces suddenly clicked into place, and Rosalind realized...

He must have a crush on her!

"We'll take a short break, then," Alexander continued, totally unaware, "and after that, we'll run through it some more."

"This way, miss, if you please," said the butler.

Rosalind followed the butler and was led into the familiar cat room.

She was very grateful they had been considerate enough to prepare this room. If she'd been led into some grand parlor room, she would've felt far too out of place and on edge to relax.

Alexander looked at home in the room as well, greeting the cats politely as he sipped from his steaming cup, but he didn't seem to be as big of a cat fanatic as his mother.

Rosalind petted the cats that trotted up to her, smiling at them so widely her cheeks almost pushed her eyes completely closed.

"You really like cats, don't you?" asked Alexander.

"I do. They're so cute and—wait, stop! Please give that back!"

The cats had started pulling out letters from Rosalind's inadvertently open bag. An opened letter had gotten a little wrinkled, but Rosalind, not seeming to care, grabbed it back and crammed it into her bag.

"Letters from home?"

"Yes... They've been talking about me getting engaged a lot recently."

"You don't seem pleased by that."

"To be honest, it's a pain in the butt," Rosalind responded with a sigh.

Alexander suddenly burst out laughing.

"You certainly don't mince words! May I ask who's been making offers?"

"Sure, I don't mind. So far, the candidates are Baron Beaton, Viscount Charlton, and Baronet Carlton—"

"What? H-Hold on a sec—"

"Yeah, their names are almost exactly the same—"

"I don't care about the names!" Alexander said, slightly impatiently. "I just, you know, wanted to make sure...you're talking about marrying their sons or grandsons, right?"

Rosalind stopped counting on her fingers.

"No, I'm talking about the heads of the family," she answered dispassionately.

"*What?!* But they're way too old! Baronet Carlton is probably older than my father and might even be as old as Gramps over here!"

The elderly butler stepped forward at once and bowed politely.

"Pardon me, young master, but I am about two years younger than the baronet."

"You've got to be kidding me..."

It was understandable Alexander had been so surprised he forgot his manners. Some age disparity was unavoidable in political marriages between aristocrats, but it was very rare for a young lady

who hadn't even come of age yet.

"Really?" asked Rosalind. "I thought it was common."

"Not unless you're a member of the Royal Family in times of war. How can you be okay with this?"

"Even if I'm not royal...my little brother is the successor of Knowles. He's still young, but these marriages shouldn't cause him any problems when he does inherit the title. Plus, they would really only be beneficial to the Knowles territory."

In the future, her little brother would inherit her father's title. As the eldest daughter, Rosalind wanted to avoid any situation where her future husband and his family would try to impede that process. A partner that coveted a title or land would only cause problems, so she figured an old, retired man would be less trouble.

And if all Rosalind's paths led to marriage, she'd prefer if her union benefited the family territory in some way.

Rosalind was proud of the fact that Knowles beef and dairy products were high quality, and she hoped to introduce them to as many people as she could. She figured it'd probably be best to marry someone who could help with things like transportation or selling the products at markets.

She thoroughly spelled out all these reasons to Alexander.

"Plus," she continued, "when I told my parents I wanted someone who would hold me back as little as possible, they gave me these options."

"What do you mean, 'hold you back'?"

"I really didn't want to marry—I wanted to become a librarian. But having a spinster older sister would also negatively affect the marriage prospects of my younger siblings."

"I see... So you never had any hopes or dreams of marriage?"

"That's right. Many husbands place restrictions on the reading material available to their household because of their own politics and personal beliefs, don't they? And I want to be able to see my friends, too."

Rosalind had a cousin that was even forbidden from writing letters to her long-time friends, simply because their husbands belonged to different political factions.

Rosalind wanted to be able to read the likes of newspapers and foreign novels as much as she pleased. She even found magazines that ran articles challenging her opinions interesting.

If I can't be a librarian... If I have to marry someone anyway...

Rosalind prioritized her own freedom in a marriage over age, looks, wealth, or even the love that might blossom in the union.

"I'm not really loveable and charming, anyway. My only redeeming features are my youth and health. You should probably pity the man that ends up accepting me."

"That's not... Well, it's quite a unique perspective on marriage. Might be best not to tell too many people about it, though."

"I won't. The only other person I've told is Amy."

Securing a marriage that benefited their family was the ultimate goal of every noblewoman. Rosalind's utilitarian cut-and-dry thinking, however, was not so common, so naturally she didn't think ladies her age would be able to stomach her views.

She hadn't spoken of it to anyone other than her own family, but for some reason, she felt like Amy would understand.

Amy had been worried over Rosalind's potential suitors, of course, but instead of lecturing her, she simply gave her a concerned look. Amy didn't try to dissuade her and simply ended the conversation by hoping that a good guy would turn up for her. A huge weight was lifted off Rosalind's shoulders after their conversation.

Rosalind continued petting the cat sitting on her lap, but Alexander looked shocked.

"You haven't told anyone other than Amy? Are you sure you wanted to tell *me*?"

"Yes," Rosalind said. "It doesn't matter much if we don't end up getting along, so I don't have to pretend or make myself look good in front of you."

"What do you mean?"

"Well...we're *fond* of the same person, right?" Rosalind lifted the cat in her lap until it was eye level. "What do you think, hm?" she asked it.

Alexander's eyes widened, and she hoisted the cat into his lap.

Rosalind knew that the reason Alexander was so friendly to her was because she was Amy and Letizia's friend.

"There's no way I'm giving up my spot as Amy's *number one* friend to you, Alec!" Rosalind announced, placing her now-empty hands on her hips.

Even though they were schoolmates, Rosalind knew that, as the daughter of an earl, she was in no way behaving or speaking as she ought toward the son of a duke.

But she just had to get this off her chest.

"I know I'm weird, and that's all well and good, but Amy says she loves me just as I am. So consider you and I rivals, Alec."

Alec was silent. In lieu of a response, the cat in his arms meowed and started climbing up his neck.

With a blank look of surprise, Alexander buried his face against the cat's fur.

In the curious silence that followed, Rosalind, satisfied with having said her peace, pretended not to notice the awkwardness and brought her teacup to her mouth.

"You...you are very interesting, Lady Rosalind," said Alexander, shoulders shaking with sudden laughter. With a look that seemed to suggest he had come to terms with something, he gently put the cat down and stood up.

"Well, let's get back to practice."

Alexander walked right up to Rosalind and took her hand, helping her up. Taking advantage of the proximity, he retrieved the crumpled letter from out of her bag and casually passed it over to the butler.

"Throw that out for me, Gramps."

"As you wish, young master."

"What?" asked Rosalind. "You can't!"

"What? You want to marry an old man?"

"I don't, but—!" Rosalind reached in vain for the letter.

"Then there shouldn't be a problem."

Grinning, Alexander laced his fingers through her outstretched hand and pulled her closer.

He flashed her a smile at point-blank range, and Rosalind's narrow eyes widened as far as they could go. She blinked repeatedly and then—belatedly—turned bright red.

Even if she didn't view him in a romantic light, Alexander's unbelievable good looks were enough to make anyone's heart stutter. The fact that he knew exactly what he was doing just made her annoyed.

"C'mon..." he said, "let's get back to practice."

"Y-Yeah, I heard you the first time!" she snapped.

They noisily returned to the music room, followed by the smiling elderly butler and—unbeknownst to them—several of the cats.



AS the singer's final note trailed off, the audience roared with applause. It was finally Rosalind and Alexander's turn to perform.

Rosalind took another deep breath.

We'll be fine. We've practiced so much.

Every day for the past two weeks, Alexander would suddenly pop up in front of Rosalind during her tiny breaks between classes or after school and practically drag her away for practice. They had lived and breathed this piece.

Rosalind hadn't even had time to relax and chat with Amy and Letizia. She'd come home every day exhausted. Were it not for the sweets Amy gave her, the teas Letizia urged her to drink, or the comfort Portia gave her, Rosalind would've given up on the performance very early on.

Alexander was almost sadistic in his perfectionism, a demon masked by a beautiful face. He had no right to call Sir Dion a demon when he was one himself.

"Go on," the attendant told her, gesturing toward the stage.

Just as Rosalind was about to walk out, she felt a warm hand against her back. When she looked up, Alexander was smiling down at her.

"It'll be fine. Your dress matches your dear Portia's fur, doesn't it?"

So Alexander was the one who chose the dress, then... Rosalind realized that after this, she'd need to sit him down and thoroughly explain to him just how shocked her guardian's wife had been when the dress had been delivered totally out of the blue...

"Well, let's go, Rosa," said Alexander.

"I'm not so sure about that nickname."

"Then how about Rose or Rosalie?"

"...I'll put a pin in it, I guess," Rosalind sighed.

That point clearly needed further discussion, but all that could wait until after the performance was over.

Rosalind's shoulders finally lowered a fraction. Alexander smiled, looking pleased.

As she felt her stiff body relax from the warmth of his hand, Rosalind, in her bright orange dress, walked out under the magical light illuminating the stage.



DURING the music recitals, each performer was provided with a waiting room in the order of their appearance. When their performance was over, Rosalind and Alexander went back to their waiting room, relieved, and were greeted by the duke's butler and several other servants. Edward was the first of their friends to arrive.

"That was a great performance!" he exclaimed.

"Your Highness!" Rosalind cried, hurrying to stand up and curtsy. "Thank you so much for coming!"

After a cheerful wave of the hand to put her at ease, Edward turned to his childhood friend.

"You've improved a lot too, haven't you, Alec?"

"That's right. I figured Sir Dion would deduct credits from my magic practicum if I gave a sloppy performance."

"You're probably right about that," said Edward. "He was back there listening, but he didn't say anything afterward, so you're probably in the clear."

Alexander only gave a smug shrug when he heard that Sir Dion had indeed been sitting in one of the staff seats.

Rosalind narrowed her eyes suspiciously at Alexander.

"Magic practicum credits... Is that why we practiced so much?"

"Well... Yeah, at first."

The time period for Rosalind's music class had overlapped with Sir Dion's magic practicum. Alexander had been given special permission to be exempted from his magic practicum so he could attend Rosalind's music classes until the recital.

But Rosalind wasn't satisfied with that being the reason for all those practices—it was overkill.

Alexander had said it was because he wanted to surprise Amy and the others, but they had far surpassed that—it was like he wanted her to play like a professional musician. Rosalind clearly had it much harder than any of the other students considering both the frequency and rigor of their practices.

"Well, I was able to do my performance as I had originally planned, and judging from the audience's reaction, I probably got a good score. You *did* help me get the result I wanted. But dragging me away for practice every day, several times a day, whenever I got

a chance to breathe—”

“Hold on, Rosa. That’s why I did it *at first*, but the more we hung out, the more I kind of enjoyed it. That’s all.”

“That’s even worse, with how hard it was! For the first time in my life, I didn’t have the time to read a single book! And *don’t* call me Rosa!”

“Rosalie, then—”

“Th-That’s not my name, either!”

Rosalind bristled, and the delicate gold chains around her head that matched her dress jiggled around. Although Alexander tried to soothe her, he remained totally calm, which just seemed to trigger Rosalind’s next complaint.

Edward watched the spat with wide eyes, dumbstruck.

“Not to worry, Your Highness,” muttered the elderly butler. “They get like this all the time.”

“All the time...?”

It was true that they were bickering, but they seemed to be enjoying each other’s banter rather than genuinely arguing. An outsider would probably see the verbal ping-pong match and assume they were friends, even.

With a final glance at the two of them, Edward sat in a chair and accepted the teacup the butler offered him.

“He always has such lively conversations with Miss Rosalind. It lifts my spirits, too, I confess,” said the butler.

“Huh... Those two must have become quite close,”

“Not quite,” Alec said, grinning. “It’s a hard fight.”

“Wha—?!” Rosalind sputtered. *What do you even have to fight with?!*

But when she saw Edward and Alexander joking around, Rosalind felt a little silly being the only one fired up.

Once she dropped her rebuttal, the butler offered her sweets and ushered her toward a chair, where she sat down. Alexander looked totally at ease taking the seat right beside her, and Rosalind didn’t even notice how natural it felt to have him there now.

“Amy and the others haven’t come yet?” asked Alec.

“You didn’t look at the program, did you?” Rosalind quipped. “There are a few performances after ours, so I think they’ll come after the recital is finished.”

Audience members were free to come and go as they pleased, so many people only came to see their friends and family members

perform.

Truth be told, so many people had come to the music hall just to watch Alexander perform that, now that their performance was over, most of the seats were probably empty.

“Amy would want to watch until the end,” said Edward.

“Yes, definitely,” agreed Rosalind.

Amy truly enjoyed listening to music, but she also knew that the other students, like Rosalind, had devoted many hours of practice to prepare for this day. Both Edward and Rosalind knew that Amy wouldn’t watch her friends’ performance only and then call it a day.

Alexander was satisfied with that explanation.

“No one would’ve minded if they left in the middle of the recital,” he said. “But then...that’s just Amy for you, isn’t it? If it were Letizia playing, Jahal probably would’ve come for her performance alone and left right as she walked off the stage.”

“You’re probably right,” conceded Edward.

Rosalind agreed, and the three of them broke out in laughter.

After all, Jahal was studying in Luducia just so he could see Letizia. In the roughly two weeks since he’d arrived, they had gotten a good read on his behavioral patterns.

Time ticked away as they chatted lightly about other topics. Eventually, a knock echoed throughout the waiting room.

Their heads spun to the clock. It was just after the time the recital had been scheduled to end.

The guard stationed in front of the door announced the much-anticipated visitors’ names, and Rosalind got to her feet to welcome them.

As soon as the butler opened the door, however, Amy lunged forward at her, cheeks pink.

“Rosalind, you were so *amazing*!”

Their bodies collided with a *thud* as Amy threw her arms around her.

“Amy!” Rosalind yelped.

“Oh!”

Rosalind staggered from Amy’s sheer velocity and the high heels she had worn for the stage, but Alexander had managed to keep her from falling.



"You were the best out of all the performances!" Amy continued, unfazed. "I wish you could have played longer! And that *dress*! I've never seen that dress before! It's so beautiful on you! It's the same color as Portia! It looks really good with your hair color too, Rosalind—it's super gorgeous!"

"Th-Thank you, Amy," said Rosalind, who had grown red herself from all of Amy's compliments. "I hear you, just take a deep breath."

Pacified, Amy detached herself from Rosalind, which was when she finally realized Alexander was there, too.

"You were so good too, Alec! You didn't have to keep it a big secret—you could have let me hear it beforehand!"

"Today wouldn't have been half as exciting if you knew what to expect."

"It was so surprising! Don't you think so too, Ed?" Amy asked with a big smile, vibrating with excitement.

"Yeah. It made today even more fun than I was expecting."

"Then it sounds like my plan worked out perfectly," said Alexander, looking satisfied.

Amy gave him a smile, too.

"I just can't stop thinking about it... I wish Tigger could have heard it, too..."

"Th-That wasn't part of my plan! Well, whatever."

Alexander was smiling uncomfortably, but he didn't seem displeased, and for some reason, the butler was nodding along.

Suddenly, a clear and beautiful voice rang throughout the room.

"That was rather good."

"You guys got the biggest cheers from the crowd!"

"Letty! Prince Jahal! Thank you!" exclaimed Rosalind, grabbing her dress and curtsying.

Jahal nodded politely.

With a sidelong glance at him, Letizia swiftly stepped forward.

"Now that all the congratulations have been exchanged... Rosalind, Amy—this way. Gentlemen, our time together may have been short, but we'll be leaving now."

"What?" all three boys asked at once, staring at her in confusion. They had only just got there, and now they were talking about leaving?

Amy and Rosalind grinned and pranced up to either side of Letizia.

“We had plans for after the recital,” said Letizia simply.

“You’re serious, Letty?” asked Jahal, looking disappointed.

“I told you before, we’re not changing our plans,” she reaffirmed, linking her arms with Amy and Rosalind’s. “So, Alec, look after Jahal for me, okay?”

“Oh, give me a break,” Alec groaned. “You guys are really going somewhere, Rosalind?”

“Yes. We’re off to Amy’s house for afternoon tea.”

The three girls nodded to each other in unison. Alec tilted his head.

“If it’s just tea, surely it wouldn’t matter if we came, too? The Northland family cook *does* whip up some interesting stuff.”

The food cooked at Amy’s house was strongly influenced by Isabelle’s general supervision. In her previous life, she was proud to be a Japanese housewife.

Most of the ingredients used were native to Luducia, but they often also used rare spices and newly imported seasonings from foreign kingdoms, so there were a wide variety of flavors.

Isabelle couldn’t get any miso paste, soy sauce, or bonito flakes, so she couldn’t perfectly recreate traditional Japanese food, but what used to be called “Westernized Japanese food,” like croquettes and hamburger steak, were regularly included in the rotation.

Recently they had perfected a dessert in which they took a bean often used in salads and soups in Luducia, sweetened it, boiled it, mashed it, and then sandwiched it in between two small, thin pancakes... In other words, they recreated the Japanese red-bean pancake treat, *dorayaki*.

Another family favorite was made by adding an improvised cherry brandy into a mixture of flours to form a smooth, soft dough.

With their adventurous cook who loved trying new things and an expansive menu of fun, exciting dishes, the Northland tea parties and dinners were always popular affairs.

Alexander argued that they could not pass up such a tempting opportunity, but with an unusually impish glint to her eye, Letizia immediately rejected the idea.

“That’s too bad, because this is a *girls-only* party.”

“Girls-only party?” asked Ed.

"A tea party just for girls," Letizia spelled out. "So, I'm very sorry, but boys just aren't allowed."

"How fun!" Ed replied pleasantly. "So it's different than a regular tea party or a social salon?"

"It's much more casual, where we can just blather on among friends," Amy answered cheerfully.

Alexander's bottom lip jutted out.

"But your tea party sounds way more fun! Don't you think it's a little unfair to leave us out?"

"Fair?" Rosalind asked dangerously. "I've been practicing so much these past few weeks... I haven't even been able to go to the lounge..."

The three girls had promised ages ago that they would get together after the recital had finished.

"Rosalind, I said I'm sorry!" Alexander said with his hands raised in surrender, accepting the jab. Even he knew he had made Rosalind practice more than was strictly necessary. "I'll do something to make it up to you."

"No, thank you. You've done enough."

"I know..."

"With that look, I don't think you know at all!"

Edward was again startled by Alexander's unruffled composure. Even when Rosalind refused his promise to make things right, Alexander had simply shrugged his shoulders and replied back cheerfully.

Edward had been the one to recommend Alexander for the recital initially, and he knew Alec was being unexpectedly proactive in his approach to practicing.

But it was starting to dawn on Edward that being able to miss Sir Dion's classes might not have been his only reason for being so involved.

"Guess we're out of luck, Alec," Edward said. "Why don't we do a boys-only party back at the dormitory? The Department of Food Management at the Royal Palace just sent me some of their new packaged rations."

"That doesn't sound fun at all. What are we going to do, have a ration tasting?"

"Trying something new won't kill you, will it?" Rosalind said coolly.

"Amy, Rosalie's acting so cold!"

“Cold... Shaved ice might be good, too...”

Edward burst into laughter at Amy’s totally unrelated response.

“For Amy, that association doesn’t surprise me.”

“Hm? Oh!”

Amy met his gaze and suddenly turned crimson, but with a few more serene words, Letizia announced their departure.

“Well, let’s get going, shall we? Now, if you’ll excuse us... Come on, Amy, Rosalind.”

“Okay!”

“Pardon us.”

The girls exited the room, giggling amongst themselves, leaving the trio of boys standing alone.

Looking around at no one in particular, Edward asked:

“So...*are* we doing a boys-only party?”

“No!” Alec and Jahal said in unison.

And with that, the boys left the waiting room with a different kind of lively noise.

Intermission: Letizia's First Visit to the Northland House

"**ARE** you sure it's okay for me to just come over unannounced?"

"Yeah, it's fine. Oh! Mom, Dad! I'm home!"

Amy, Letizia, and Rosalind stepped into the entrance hall of the Northland house and immediately saw Isabelle, carrying flowers to decorate the interior with, and Joshua, although it was unusual for him to be home from work so early.

"Welcome back, Amy!" Isabelle greeted her daughter. "It's nice to see you again, Rosalind. Oh...? You've brought another friend too...?"

Isabelle's large eyes turned perfectly round when they landed on Letizia, and the flower basket fell from her hands. Joshua swiftly caught it before it crashed on the floor.

I knew Letizia would remind Mom of that one celebrity...

"I-Is this Broadway? Why would such a famous stage actress grace our presence?!"

"Because she's *not* a famous stage actress," Amy added quickly. "Trust me, I understand why you made the connection, but she's not. Just take a deep breath, Mom."

"But...but...!"

"*Broad...way...?*" Letizia repeated the foreign word.

"Oh!" exclaimed Joshua, sounding impressed. "She must have come to talk about the Load Lightener, for all those heavy theater props! The tool's still in the prototype stage, but word must travel quickly!"

"Dad, *no*! She's not a theater actress!"

"*Praaps...*?" muttered Letizia, tilting her head.

Amy had invited her to come to the Northland house to meet Tigger. Letizia was immediately put at ease by Amy's parents' complete lack of pretension or intimidation so often found in aristocrats, but she had no idea what in the world they were talking about.

Letizia felt thoroughly welcomed, but it was a different

reception than she normally got from other families as the daughter of a marquess. She was a bit bewildered but not displeased. Although the countess's rush of excitement had been a little unexpected...

"Someone, quick, I'll need costumes! Fetch me a military uniform and a rapier! And for Rosalind, a red...no, a pink dress would probably be best. With lots of frills, ribbons, and don't forget the bell sleeves! And then—"

"Mom, *please*..." Amy groaned.

"No costumes? Then how about we just choreograph a big dance number down the stairs, with bells and—"

"*Mom!*" Amy loudly interrupted. "Letty came to see *Tigger*."

Going to the theater was one of Isabelle's biggest hobbies in her previous life. She would make Joshua go with her, and he had become quite fond of it, too. One of their biggest regrets was not being able to go to the bigger theaters in town because they lived so far away.

Even during the belated introductions that followed, Isabelle's gold eyes sparkled as she fixed her gaze on Amy's friends. Amy gave a small shrug in defeat—she had reacted exactly as Amy had predicted.

"Do make yourselves at home," said Isabelle. "Ah... The Rose of Versailles herself, holding Tigger... Pinch me, dear, I'm dreaming!"

"Get going, Amy," Joshua urged. "Tigger's waiting for you, isn't he?"

"You're right," said Amy. "Let's go, guys!"

"Y-Yeah."

The three girls quickly left the entrance hall, leaving behind Isabelle, gazing up at the ceiling, lost in her own daydream, and Joshua attempting to bring her back down to earth.



AMY opened the door to her room. The moment Tigger saw her, he impatiently darted out from under the cushion and started his "welcome home" greeting routine.

"So...this is Tigger..."

"Yeah!" said Amy, glowing with happiness at Tigger's

attentions. "Isn't he cute, Letty?"

"He really *is* huge," said Letty, eyes wide. "I'd heard he was big, but I didn't expect him to be *this* big."

His paws were massive, his tail was long, and his long, fluffy fur made him look even bigger than he was. The flash in his golden eyes almost reminded Letizia of a wild cat. As Amy kneeled on the ground and Tigger pushed against her, clinging to her, Letizia almost thought he was attacking her.

He was behaving the same way her own cat, Mimi, behaved, but Letizia was shocked at how his size alone made it all seem so much more dangerous.

"Tigger might look scary, but he's a very gentle cat," Amy explained. "He didn't know what to do with himself when he saw how energetic Portia was."

"Really?"

"Yeah," said Rosalind, explaining that she had brought Portia over a few times before. "Portia wouldn't stop bugging him to play with her."

Whether or not his placidity came from his size or was just a natural part of his personality, Tigger had spent most of their playdates glued to Amy's side, tail lazily swishing as he watched Portia running around like a lunatic from the corner of his eye.

Tigger seemed to show his comparative dignity by standing only after being invited to play by Portia several times and being goaded by Amy.

Portia would run in circles around him like a ball of energy, and then Tigger would put a foot out to stop her. He'd retract his foot, she'd start running around again, and then he'd put out his foot in a never-ending cycle... Amy and Rosalind looked on fondly whenever they played like that.

"I know he looks kind of wild, but he's very docile," Rosalind said.

"That's right!" Amy insisted. "When he plays with me, he never uses his claws, no matter how crazy we get! He does play-bite sometimes, though."

"Really?"

Letizia was shocked—even Mimi had scratched her a few times when she was a kitten.

But even if Mimi had sometimes scratched her, Letizia hadn't wanted to shunt responsibility of her off to the servants. After a

while, Letizia simply got more used to handling her, and Mimi didn't hurt her anymore.

The girls sat down on the sofa at Amy's urging and continued their discussion of cats.

"What's Mimi like?" Amy asked.

"She's not quite as calm as Tigger, but from what I've heard, not as hyperactive as Portia, either."

"I bet her coat is totally luxurious and that she acts like a princess!"

"A princess... Yeah, I guess I'd put it that way."

"I wonder how they'd act if we got all three cats together to play!"

A vision immediately popped into their minds.

Mimi, sitting demurely and comfortably on top of an embroidered cushion... Tigger, dozing on a windowsill a short distance away... Portia, sprinting back and forth between the two of them...

The three girls sighed in unison and squealed, "It'd be so *cute*!"

Chapter 2: Tidings from Harold

THEY had so much fun at their girls-only party that it seemed to be over in the blink of an eye. With the setting sun behind them, Rosalind and Letizia said their farewells, and Amy, Isabelle, and Tigger watched them leave from the front door until their carriage rode out of sight.

“That was so much fun!” cried Amy, smiling up at Isabelle.

“I’m so glad you’ve made such wonderful friends, dear. How’s school been going?”

“It’s been fine. Some kids say rude things about me, but they always come around eventually. I recognize a lot of students’ surnames from the club bulletin, too.”

“Right, the Cat Club bulletin.”

The Cat Club, spearheaded by the Duchess of Coverdale, was incredibly well-known in aristocratic circles.

Ever since Amy had started assisting veterinarians in the Royal Capital at the duchess’s request, “Lady Amy, daughter of the Earl of Northland” had become a very familiar name among the Cat Club members.

In fact, one of the reasons why the teasing at school never really escalated was because many aristocratic pet owners had at some point been indebted to Amy’s healing magic.

As Amy turned to head back inside, Tigger mirrored her movements and trotted alongside her. After all these years, everyone in the Northland house was very used to the sight of Tigger marching right beside Amy like a security escort.

Tigger would have preferred it if Amy picked him up like a baby and carried him, but despite how much Amy had grown, picking him up was still a struggle. Tigger was massive, of course, but he was also so fluffy that when Amy held him, his fur obscured 80 percent of her vision.

“Oh, I just remembered!” said Isabelle. “We just got a letter from Hal—the first one in a while.”

“From Harold?! Where is he now? Is he doing all right?”

"I haven't read it yet, actually. Your father went to work, and I was waiting for him to get back to open it. What do you think? Should we go ahead and read it?"

"Hmm... I *am* curious, but...I suppose if it had been really urgent, he would have used the guild to get in touch. Since it's just a regular letter, nothing crazy must have happened."

Amy was relieved that he'd sent word after such a long stretch of silence, but from their experiences thus far, her older brother's letters never said anything significant. He wasn't a very good correspondent, and the best they could hope for from his letters were two or three short sentences written in a scrawl.

"Knowing Harold, it'll probably just say, 'I'm at the ocean! The seafood's great!' or something like that," Amy continued.

"They really are just little slips of paper reminding us that he's alive, aren't they?" agreed Isabelle, laughing with Amy. "Well, as long as he's doing well, that's all that matters. We'll just all read it together when your father comes home, then."

Sometimes Harold's letters would include trinkets like unusual coins from the places he'd visited or scales from magical beasts he'd hunted, but the contents of his letters were always the same—simple and brief. Almost like he couldn't shake his habits from text messaging in his past life. Sometimes Nicholas or Gilbert would write in a little more detail, and the Northlands could finally get a clearer picture of what Harold was up to.

"It's still hard to believe that Harold was such a good student at school," Amy said. "He recommended I take this one geography class—he said it was fun—but there were so many papers I had to write, and the homework was so difficult! No one could guess how many class credits he graduated with just by looking at him."

"Hal always had a knack for remembering that kind of stuff, even in our previous lives. He knew exactly which types of monsters could appear on a random rocky stretch of land in any game. And he always went off, doing things on his own... Maybe it gave him a good foundation to build on."

"That's right... He'd spend all that time making those detailed game guides by himself for no reason. But he'd never study for his tests..."

"He could have allocated a little of that motivation in other areas... As it stands, he is the successor to your father's earldom..." Isabelle grumbled, although she didn't seem seriously concerned

about it.

In Luducia, aristocratic titles and their territories were almost always inherited by a blood relative. Harold and Amy were the only two direct descendants of the Northland family, but because Amy was currently the Third Prince's fiancée candidate, that left Harold as the only real successor.

An adventurer being the head of an aristocratic territory wasn't entirely unheard of, but it tended to be adamantly opposed by the people living in the territory, so it certainly wasn't the preferred arrangement.

With their father Joshua still in good health, however, Harold's profession wasn't an urgent issue.

Isabelle and Joshua thought that, even if Harold didn't succeed the earldom, they would welcome either his future child or a suitable distant relative as the successor.

"But you know," said Isabelle, cupping her cheeks and sighing, "these days, I'm more worried about whether Hal can get married at all."

"Even if he did marry, he'd probably go off on a long hunting expedition right after the wedding and make his wife get fed up with him," Amy reasoned.

Harold was obsessed with hunting magical beasts, and he had a track record of several failed relationships to show for it.

Isabelle and Joshua had a policy that their children were not to be forced into engagements before they were eighteen years old, and Amy was very glad they did. Being abandoned after getting engaged or married so your husband could go hunt monsters would be hard for anyone, no matter how loving or understanding they were.

"Although I've heard that political marriages without any love involved actually go better when the husband tends to stay out of the house," Isabelle added.

"I think Harold would rather stay single forever than go through all that trouble."

"Yes, I daresay I agree..."

As a matter of fact, Harold had already received several marriage offers. They had been rejected on account of his current absence, but some of them had been rather persistent.

One of the reasons Harold had been hunting for so long without ever visiting home was probably so there was no way he

could be shown the family histories or portraits of his own fiancée candidates.

In this world, at twenty years old, Harold was at the perfect age for marriage, but he'd just be a college student in their previous lives. Plus, he had just started making his way in the world as an adventurer, which had been his life-long dream. He probably wanted to carry on with his adventures for quite a while longer.

However, the biggest reason for his marriage aversion was that Harold just couldn't be bothered with anything he wasn't interested in.

Amy and Isabelle returned to the living room and sat on the sofa. Tigger immediately hopped up on Amy's lap. As Amy blissfully pet his soft fur, Isabelle leaned over and whispered: "It doesn't even seem like Harold has a girlfriend right now, so you may very well get married before he does!"

"What?!"

"Am I that off the mark?"

"B-But I'm—I'm just a *candidate*!" Amy's cheeks flushed at the unexpected 180 the conversation took.

"Are you still worried about that otome game?" Isabelle asked, tilting her head to one side.

"No, not as much as before," Amy answered after some thought, raking her fingers through Tigger's long fur. "I guess I just feel...confused. Prince Jahal looked exactly like one of the characters too, and that just felt like...confirmation."

From the time Amy had remembered her past life, including the otome game she used to play, until now, she had dedicated her life to practicing magic. She pushed her limits every day and had experienced so much in that time, she had stopped openly feeling suspicious that she was nothing more than a character someone had made, living in a video game world.

But some worries still lingered.

The fact that several people she knew looked exactly like characters from the game was too much of a coincidence. She hadn't found definite proof that the similarities were totally unrelated to the game, either.

Even if Amy wasn't sure whether or not the girl she saw at Wallum was the heroine of the game, she feared that the "heroine" would soon make her appearance and be the catalyst for the "invisible hand of the game" to start influencing the trajectory of

the plot. This fear had been slowly and steadily building in her chest like a thin stream of sand.

And ironically, the two people who stirred up her anxiety most were her friends Edward and Alexander—doppelgangers of two of the love interests from the game. As they had matured, they'd started to look more and more like the characters she could remember from the opening screen until they were perfect replicas.

Amy tried to accept her reality in this world. But the closer she got to them, the more she remembered that image from the game... Amy's existence felt like it was being pulled in two different directions.

"That does sound like it would be hard," her mother sympathized.

"What I *do* know is that this is my reality right now."

Whether it be Amy's reincarnated family members or the young men who appeared to be love interests from an otome game, everyone's thoughts, actions, and lives were guided by their own will.

Amy slipped her hands under Tigger's front armpits and, with some effort, hoisted him up. Turning him to face her, Amy planted his front legs on her shoulders and wrapped her arms around him in a hug. Tigger's happy meows rang in her ears. With his velvety fur and warmth pressed against her cheek, she couldn't help smiling.

Tigger was Amy's closest piece of reality, one that she could believe in unconditionally. If she believed that she was inside a fictional world of someone else's creation, that would mean denying the reality of Tigger—and there was no way Amy could do that.

"That's why, if the heroine makes an appearance and the invisible hand of the game starts to intervene, then..."

"Then...?"

"I'll go away somewhere with Tigger!"

"Running away as fast as you can?" Isabelle chuckled. "I'm not quite sure if that makes you optimistic or pessimistic!"

If a piece of the game were to go missing, that would probably alter the course of the plot—if even only by a little bit.

Specifically, if Amy (who was likely the story's villainess) were out of the picture, it'd be impossible for her to interact with the heroine at all, much less mistreat her in some way.

From whichever angle Amy examined the matter, leaving seemed to be the only way the period in which the game played out

could end without her family getting torn apart, or anyone else getting hurt.

But it would mean I'd never be able to see Ed again...

A throb of pain stung Amy's chest.

The pendant necklace Edward had given her swayed as she took Tigger off her lap in an attempt to obscure the inexplicable tears that threatened her eyes.

"Well, one thing's for sure," said Isabelle. "Living your life, even with an emergency plan B, is much better than just cowering in fear over some hypothetical future, right?"

"Right. I'll keep giving it my all!"

Isabelle chuckled.

"Don't overwork yourself, okay?"

Isabelle smiled as Amy unknowingly clutched her pendant.



THAT evening, after Amy's father had returned home and they had finished supper, they decided to unwind in the living room and open Harold's letter.

Joshua picked up the letter from the tray where they had left it and raised his eyebrows.

"It's thicker than usual."

"It is!" chimed Isabelle.

Harold had never needed more than one sheet of paper for his previous letters.

Isabelle looked over Joshua's shoulder and watched curiously as he cut the seal with a letter opener. A folded map came out of the envelope.

"That boy..." muttered Isabelle. "Maybe he accidentally put a map inside instead of his letter?"

"No," said Joshua, smiling, "this is Harold we're talking about, after all. He probably thought explaining the location was too much of a hassle, so he just used a map instead of properly writing about it on normal paper."

Joshua spread out the map over the tea-table.

The map was made from thin paper, but it was surprisingly large once fully opened, completely covering the small table. Just as Joshua had predicted, there were several spots where Harold had

written straight on the map.

The writing, however, looked more like personal notes. He had drawn various symbols and arrows, jotted down dates, and included poorly drawn illustrations. It looked more like a picture-diary made by an elementary school student than a letter.

This was the tidings they had received after almost two months of no news.

“Seriously, Harold?” Amy grumbled with furrowed brows. “A pictographic letter that needs deciphering? Write in sentences—*sentences!*”

Amy’s parents looked bemused yet understanding, but Amy had grown accustomed to proper letters from her long-held correspondence with Edward, a very good pen pal. To her, the pictograph-map-letter just looked lazy.

“That’s our Harold, I suppose,” said Isabelle. “Oh! That drawing that sort of looks like a Komodo dragon...that’s some sort of magical beast, right? I wonder if this means that was where he defeated one?”

“It looks like he’s going over his recent travels,” said Joshua.

Various locations were connected by arrows, and beside them Harold had scribbled dates not only in the past but in the future, too. It almost looked like he was trying to tell them his itinerary.

Meanwhile, on the top margin of the map, some underlined writing caught Amy’s eye. This word seemed to be written badly out of excitement rather than sloppiness, and from where Amy was sitting, looking at it upside-down, it was so scribbly it looked like some sort of a spell.

“Dad,” said Amy, pointing to it, “what does this say?”

“That is...ah, I see. ‘I found Yasumi!’ What’s a yasumi? The name of some new magical beast?”

“Yasumi?” wondered Amy aloud. “Yasumi... Oh! Didn’t Hal used to play a video game with a friend named something like that?”

“You mean that one ‘miraculous support’ he would go on about?” asked Isabelle.

“It was either ‘Yasumi’ or ‘Yagami’, wasn’t it?”

“I don’t remember,” Joshua confessed.

Amy pressed her fingers against her temples and dove into the deep recesses of her memory.

“Yasumi... Yagami... But now that I think about it, I also get

the feeling he called them ‘Yasmine’...”

While playing the fantasy-themed action role-playing video game he was completely obsessed with in their past lives, Harold had a fateful encounter with a player who had amazing support skills. Harold was wandering through various kingdoms, hoping to find an adventurer equally as talented in this world to join his party, and from the sound of it, he finally had.

“So basically, it means he got another party member,” deduced Joshua.

“Not quite, dear!” said Isabelle. “He only wrote that he *found* them, so we’re not sure whether or not they’ve joined his party.”

If there was such a skilled person in this world, they would probably have already been scooped up by another party. But Amy had a strange feeling that her brother would somehow manage to convince them to join his party, anyhow.

“Harold would probably do just about anything to win them over, even beg on his hands and knees, like he did last time.”

“He probably would,” Isabelle admitted, laughing and looking back at the map. “Oh!”

Isabelle had noticed something else Harold had written. She pointed to a place which was circled, where Harold had goofily written, “Gonna hunt heeere!”

“That’s the special hunting zone, isn’t it?” asked Joshua.

“It is... Will Harold and the others be okay?” Amy wondered.

The place where Harold had so cheerfully indicated he was going to hunt was known as the land of death, because more monsters lived there than almost any other place on the continent. The area was home to magical beasts of all kinds—magical beast subspecies, rare magical beasts, and magical beasts that were incredibly difficult to defeat.

A monster’s difficulty—in other words, the danger they posed—was proportional to the rewards adventurers would receive after the hunt was completed. Therefore, the special hunting zone had become a location only attempted by skilled adventurers or those who made their living by bounty hunting.

Naturally, if an adventurer without any real skill set foot there, there was no guarantee they’d make it out alive.

Harold and Amy may not have been best friends who did everything together, but they did care for each other a lot as siblings. Amy was worried for her older brother.

Joshua chuckled and put a hand on his chin.

“At Harold’s rank, they’re probably at a high enough level that they can take on the challenge. Nothing is certain, though. Their situation will constantly change depending on which magical beasts they encounter.”

“That’s likely,” said Amy.

“Nevertheless, if he goes through the formal procedures beforehand, they should have a member of the guild experienced in the special hunting zone to guide them. And besides, Harold might not always act like it, but he doesn’t overestimate his own abilities. He can tell when it’s time to retreat, so he probably won’t do anything reckless.”

“He’s right,” said Isabelle. “Hal never likes to work too hard, you know, and he’s not the type of guy to be motivated by macho pride. He’d be the first to get out of a hairy situation.”

“I hope so...”

“Oh! Look, Amy! Over here...”

Joshua followed the arrow through several towns until it landed on the final destination—the Royal Capital of Luducia, where Amy and her parents currently stood.

A date was written down, and above that, a simple picture of two clashing swords.

“That’s the date of the tournament, isn’t it?” asked Isabelle.

“I haven’t heard anything about it, but maybe he’s going to participate, too,” said Joshua. “If he’s scheduled this in advance, he probably won’t overdo it in the special hunting zone beforehand.”

As long as their application was submitted in advance, anyone could participate in the athletic tournament. And if the applicant was applying from outside of the kingdom, the process could even be done through a guild.

Amy and her parents exchanged glances.

“Does this mean Harold’s coming home?” Amy asked.

“He’s at least planning to be at the athletic tournament, isn’t he?” Isabelle said. “In that case, maybe he’s visiting the special hunting zone as a way to test out his strength.”

“In the special hunting zone? That seems like overkill...” Amy remarked. “But I see what you mean. In that case, maybe I won’t have to worry about him so much. Oh, Tigger!”

Tigger, who had been quietly sitting beside Amy, suddenly hopped onto the table—right on top of the map.

The thin paper wrinkled under his paws.

"Oh, dear!" Isabelle cried.

"Tigger! No, Tigger!"

Whether it had been something taught to him when he was with his original owner or during his stay with the Duchess of Coverdale, Tigger had never jumped on tables since Amy had adopted him.

But now, not only had he jumped on one for the first time, but he had also ignored Amy's command to get down. Instead, Tigger leisurely tucked his forefeet under his body and sat down.

"Oh! He looks like a giant loaf of bread!" Amy exclaimed.

"He looks so comfortable," sighed Isabelle. "It's hard to scold him when he looks like that, isn't it?"

"Maybe he just wanted to sit on paper?" Joshua suggested. "The table is so covered up, Tigger probably thinks he's sitting on a giant piece of paper, not a table!"

"You think so?"

Tigger yawned widely as the three humans chattered around him, his gold eyes hazy and sleepy.

Tigger was usually shy around anyone but Amy, but he had become visibly more relaxed around the other members of the family. It warmed Amy's heart every time she saw it.

"I don't like him being on the table, but he *does* look really cute like that... Tigger, why don't you come here?" Amy said, crouching down and holding out both arms.

Tigger meowed back in response and slowly started to move. He took a few steps, crinkling the thin paper more along the way, and then leaped into Amy's arms.

Amy caught him and held him as she sat on the floor. Tigger squinted his eyes, looking relaxed, as Amy raked her hands through his soft fur. She smiled back at him.

"Still getting along well, eh?" remarked Joshua.

"Yes! I love him so much!"

Amy had never been allowed to have a pet in her previous life, so in this one, she had devoted all her time and energy into studying magic just so she could have Tigger.

For Amy, magic and animals had already become an integral part of her life—a part of herself. At this point, removing them would be unthinkable.

Isabelle giggled and turned to her husband.

“It looks like *he’s* got quite a formidable opponent with this one. Don’t you pity him a tiny bit, dear?”

“What for?”

“Just as he thinks he’s overcome a massive hurdle in winning *you* over, he’ll realize there’s an even greater hurdle towering over him.”

“...It’ll be a test, I suppose,” Joshua said, shrugging his shoulders.

Isabelle smiled as she watched her husband fold up the slightly wrinkled map.

Intermission: A Short Rest Under the Gazebo

“OH! Roodle!”

How high up can he spot his target? Amy wondered. Roodle always seemed to be flying so high up whenever he recognized her.

The snowy owl landed safely on Amy’s arm, his flapping wings rustling her hair.

Roodle looked very proud when Amy thanked him for making the long journey and then, clearly hoping for head scratches, he bent his head forward. A stronger person than Amy might’ve been able to look at this huge owl without melting into a puddle of cuteness, but she was a sucker for all animals.

Amy scratched his forehead obediently and held out some treats for him, which he delightedly gobbled up. Some days Roodle would fly off to his next destination right after eating; other days, he would stay for a while.

Now that Roodle had retired from his position as a royal messenger bird, Amy and Edward had prepared places for him to sleep at the Royal Palace and at the Northland family house.



“AMY!” called Isabelle, walking with Edward through the garden. “Prince Edward is here. Amy?”

Amy was sitting under the gazebo, totally unaware of their presence.

“It’s fine,” whispered Edward, pressing a finger to his lips with a rare mischievous look on his face. The look was so boyish, Isabelle was viscerally reminded that Edward was in fact younger than her adult son, Harold.

Isabelle smiled, feeling gratified that the prince felt comfortable enough to make that face around her. The Northland house seemed to have become a place where he didn’t feel the need to always act like a prince or worry about how others perceived him.

Amy looked comfortable, with Roodle perched on her arm and Tigger sitting on her lap. She took turns petting the two animals with her free hand as she sung quietly to herself.

Occasionally smiling at Tigger and Roodle as they repositioned from time to time, Amy looked genuinely happy.



Edward had come to pick up Amy for the horse ride they had agreed to go on, but unable to bring himself to interrupt the blissful scene before him, his voice simply evaporated in his throat.

Now that he had gotten to see Amy smiling like that, maybe he didn't care if they missed out on horse riding...

Just as Edward considered that prospect, something pulled at the hem of his coat.

"Hm? Ah!"

"*Maaah!*" an animal cried.

"...Was that Ed's voice?" Amy asked aloud. "Oh my—look at the time!"

Amy jumped in surprise, prompting Tigger to hop off her lap and Roodle to fly up to the roof of the gazebo. Suddenly relieved of their combined weight, Amy rushed over to Edward and Isabelle.

"No! Mel, Roe, don't eat that!"

By the time she reached them, Edward and Isabelle were holding the two goats, one black and one white, that had been given to Amy by her grandfather. The three of them stood together, their happy, chattering voices echoing throughout the garden.

Intermission: The Camera is Ready

SOME time ago, Amy's father Joshua had received a box of sea serpent eyes, the material required to make a camera lens.

Usually when magical tools were invented, even if researchers had planned adequately beforehand, roadblocks would inevitably crop up in the production process. The researcher behind this invention, however, was Joshua, and he had been an engineer in his past life.

Making full use of his past skills, the process still took some time, but he was finally able to successfully build a camera.

He unveiled the camera in the living room only to his family. It looked like a box—rectangular and taller than it was wide—with a single lens in the center of the front face. It looked more like a vintage film camera than the digital cameras Amy had used in her past life.

"It almost looks like a twin-lens reflex camera or a medium format camera!" Isabelle exclaimed.

"It seemed the most fitting style," Joshua explained.

Isabelle and Joshua's generation had grown up using film cameras. Isabelle's father had even collected vintage cameras as a hobby, so she gazed at this camera's vintage, boxy style with fondness.

Isabelle and Joshua talked about technical camera specifications that made absolutely no sense to Amy. Lens elements, exposure, f-ratio... The only words Amy could somewhat understand were "focal point" and "shutter speed." Knowledge of the rest of that stuff wasn't really necessary when using a smartphone.

Taking a picture with Joshua's invention didn't require any photographic film or developing. All you had to do was place a sheet of special paper (much like photo paper) into the back of the camera, one at a time, look at the view from the top of the camera, and push the shutter.

You could only take as many photos as the number of photo

papers you had prepared in advance, and you couldn't print over an already used paper, either. But even with these limitations, the camera would certainly be ground-breaking in this world where photos didn't even exist.

At its current stage of development, the camera could only take still images, but Joshua assured them that he had plans for future improvements that would make it capable of filming videos.

"And you've named it an 'image machine' instead of a camera?" Amy asked.

"That's right," Joshua replied. "I figured it would be easier to explain."

The word "camera" meant nothing to the people in this world. Amy had once heard that the name "camera" actually came from a word that meant reproducing an image of something from reality.

"But then again, I'm not planning on showing it to the general public, and I'm only making this one, so I suppose it doesn't matter what we call it."

"Why not?"

"Sea serpent eyes aren't exactly easy to get a hold of. It would be too expensive to mass-produce this."

"I guess you're right..."

They had been talking about wanting a camera for a long time, but the project had been shelved for years because of issues securing the lens material.

It was only because Edward had by pure chance heard Amy grumble to herself, "If only we had sea serpent eyes..." that Joshua had been able to create this one camera at all.

Joshua watched Amy carefully lifting the new camera to examine it with dark bags under his eyes—he had sacrificed many nights of sleep in favor of power naps to get it done.

"Besides," Joshua pressed on, "it'll just cause all sorts of problems if something like that were to suddenly pop into existence. Someone else will make something similar if there's a real need for it."

"It will cause problems?" asked Amy.

"Certainly," said Isabelle. "Artists who paint portraits, for example, might lose their jobs. But then again...maybe your father should just secure the rights to some of the technology, just in case..."

"My dear, you are as wise as ever," Joshua smiled. "So, Amy,

have you decided what you're going to take a picture of?"

"Yeah!"

The photo paper was specially made paper treated with a unique blend of magic. Joshua couldn't prepare many sheets because it was in the prototype stage, so today they could only take five or six pictures.

Amy gave the "image machine" back to her father, scooped Tigger up from where he stood at her feet, and smiled widely.

"I'll take one of Tigger!"

"I thought you would say that. But can he stay still for long enough?"

"He'll be okay if I hold him like this!"

"Well... All right, then."

Joshua had only hesitated because any movement would cause blurring and ruin the shot, but Amy was determined that Tigger would be the camera's first subject.

Given that Amy was the entire reason Joshua had been able to procure the sea serpent eyes for the lens, he couldn't exactly refuse her request. Besides, she never got a chance to take a picture with any cats in her last life with her allergies and all.

"Okay, Amy, keep holding Tigger like that and take a seat in that chair over there. Isabelle, could you draw just the lace curtains closed?"

"For this window, right? And dear, would you be able to reprint the photo somehow?"

"I could copy it, but the quality would go down quite a bit."

"In that case, I'd also like a picture of Amy and Tigger, so take two of them sitting like that, okay?"

Amy listened to her parents' cheerful conversation as she sat, holding Tigger in her lap. The fluffy cat propped his front paws up on her shoulders and purred happily.

"All right, I'll take the picture now. Look this way. Tigger! This way! Hey, Tigger!"

"That tickles, Tigger!" Amy giggled. "Can't you just look over at dad for a little bit?"

Whether because Tigger didn't hear Joshua or he simply didn't care, he just pressed his forehead against Amy's throat, snuggling against her. He even pretended not to notice her pleas.

"Well, then! Amy, why don't you look at Tigger?" suggested Isabelle. "Then we can have a cute picture of you two looking at

each other!”

“It’ll look like one of those wedding photos,” commented Joshua.

“You can just get a picture of Tigger,” Amy insisted.

“It’s fine!” Isabelle whined. “Oh look, that’s a nice angle! Oh, it’s just so lovely! Hurry and take it, dear!”

“R-Right!”

“Oooh!” Isabelle squealed. “Their foreheads are touching! That’s adorable! Take another one, dear! And now their cheeks are touching! Oh, that’s *perfect*! Amy’s finger is on Tigger’s nose! It’s too cute, I can’t stand it!”

In the end, all the photo paper was used on Amy and Tigger.

As they giddily looked over the finished products, Amy was surprised by the beautiful picture quality.

“That’s amazing! They’re so clear!”

The photo was a little small, but it was printed in full color. You could see every detail, from Tigger’s gorgeous patterning to his long, straight whiskers.

Joshua muttered about how he still had some improvements and adjustments to make, but he seemed to be satisfied enough with the final result.

“We should show Prince Edward one of the pictures to thank him again for the sea serpent eyes,” Isabelle suggested. “You can choose which one, Amy.”

“Huh?”

“Oh, I just remembered I’ll see him tomorrow when he comes for his magical tool lesson... I suppose I can just give him one then,” Joshua said.

“What?!” Amy cried again.

They were all cute close-up portraits of Amy and Tigger. If they were just of Tigger, she’d want them to be shown off as much as possible, but it was a different story when she was included in the photo! Even in her past life, she never took pictures of herself. She wasn’t into selfies.

“Could you take one of Tigger and Roodle next time and give him one of those, instead?”

“But these were the first photos taken—they’re priceless!” Isabelle said. “Don’t you think so too, dear?”

“Of course, dear,” Joshua replied.

Even in this life, when Isabelle made up her mind, no one in

the family dared oppose her. Amy swallowed her objections and hovered over the photos, eventually selecting one and handing it to her father.



SEVERAL days later, a slightly sullen Joshua handed Amy a small, beautifully wrapped box.

“What’s this?” Amy asked.

“From His Highness. A thank-you gift for the photo, apparently.”

Brimming with curiosity, Amy opened the package, revealing a thick, oval pendant. It was the same shade of gold as Amy’s eyes and was affixed to a delicate chain long enough to be comfortably worn with any outfit. The face of the pendant was intricately carved and incredibly beautiful.

“Oh my goodness...” Amy gasped.

“What a beautiful pendant!” cried Isabelle. “Oh look, it’s a locket!”

“A locket?”

“Press that spot right there.”

Amy pressed the projecting piece of metal on the edge of the pendant and the whole thing clicked open. Amy’s name was engraved on the backside of the face, and the spot where a portrait miniature would fit inside lay empty.

Isabelle smiled meaningfully, pointing to the empty spot.

“Look, you can put a photo or something here.”

“Oh, I know! I’ll put one of Tigger!”

Amy beamed and rushed off to get the pictures they had taken the other day to pick one out.

Seeing their daughter so overjoyed, Isabelle and Joshua smiled at each other.

“I was hoping she’d want a picture of Ed to put in there,” Isabelle lamented.

“She doesn’t need that,” Joshua grouched.

If you added Amy’s age from her past life to her age now, she should by all counts have the psyche of an adult. But it seemed as though she was being held back by her body’s age, more innocent and childlike than an adult, but only considered “a little calm for

her age.” It probably didn’t help that she hadn’t had any romantic relationships at all in her previous life.

Amy hummed and hawed over the photos in her hand, holding each one up against the pendant with Tigger sitting right by her side.

Their daughter may have been too young for love just yet, but she looked as happy as could be.

“Well, this may end up being a good thing. Would you like tea, dear?”

“...Yes, dear.”

And so, another peaceful afternoon passed by in the Northland family house.

Intermission: Chocolate Chip Cookie Day

UNDER the watchful eye of Mrs. Turner, the Northland cook, who had laid out the ingredients in a line, Amy added the butter, sugar, and eggs into a bowl and mixed them with a wooden spatula. She finished the batter by gently mixing in sifted flour and, finally, chocolate chips.

Amy rolled the dough into circles with her hands, pushed them down flat on a baking sheet, and then put the baking sheet in the oven.

“So it’s Chocolate Chip Cookie Day today, huh?” mused Mrs. Turner aloud. “You sure do know a lot of stuff, Lady Amy!”

“I didn’t know about it before today, either! Mrs. Akitsuki wrote about it in the paper today.”

“Oh! Isn’t she the one who writes that serial novel you and your mother are always looking forward to?”

“Yes! She published another chapter today along with the Chocolate Chip Cookie Day article!”

As they chatted and drank tea, the sweet aroma of butter and chocolate wafted from the oven.

Once the cookies were finished baking and had cooled slightly, Amy thanked Mrs. Turner for her help and left the kitchen with a plate stacked high with cookies.

“Mom! Ta-da! Chocolate chip cookies!”

“...And here I thought the robot cat from your favorite show had appeared,” said Isabelle, closing her book with a *snap* and smiling at Amy. She had been reading while relaxing and petting Tigger. “I’ve been wondering what you were up to. You almost never leave Tigger with me.”

“I wanted to bake some cookies after reading that article.”

Tigger hopped off the sofa and started trotting toward Amy, looking curiously at the cookies on the table. Although he was eyeing the still-warm cookies with great interest, these were not for cats to eat.

Amy moved the plate far away from Tigger’s reach, and he

hung his head in disappointment. She sat down in front of him and put her arms around him, musing that he would make an adorable hunchback.

“Ahh,” Amy sighed. “You’re as soft as ever today... I’m sorry, Tigger, but you can’t have any cookies.”

“He looks so disappointed, doesn’t he?” said Isabelle.

“But they’re not good for cats...” Amy lamented, burying her face in the thick fur around Tigger’s neck. “Oh, I know!”

Her head popped back up and she gave him a light kiss on the tip of his nose.

“May 23 is Chocolate Chip Cookie Day, but it’s also Kiss Day!”

“Oh, Amy...” Isabelle said, chuckling.

With Tigger’s mood slightly improved, Amy gave Tigger cat treats as she and her mother enjoyed the soft, freshly baked chocolate chip cookies.

Chapter 3: The Tournament Draws Near

THE *clang* of swords clashing echoed throughout the combat training grounds.

The training grounds, located in a corner of the Royal Palace, were mostly used by royal guards to practice their swordsmanship. It was enclosed by a circular wall, floored by hardened dirt, and under its partial roof stood a tiered platform.

As the sun began its descent, four shadowy figures practiced their sword skills on the training grounds.

Several others stood waiting on the outskirts, their gazes fixed on the two pairs of clashing opponents. Although they were some distance away, the onlookers gasped when they heard the *woosh* of one of the long swords being swung downward.

There was a tall, muscular, graying man in one of the dueling pairs. The man was a talented swordsman—he had capitalized on his stature to bring down his sword in a brilliant flash. He gave off the air of a soldier and was barking detailed feedback to his opponent even as he continued attacking.

“Deflect the attack to the outside and immediately take a defensive position. Watch the angle of your back leg,” said the man, known as General Riley.

General Riley came from a military family, but in his youth, he had made a name for himself through military battles and had eventually ascended to the title of military commander.

Aside from the occasional skirmish in neighboring countries, Luducia was a country at peace for the most part. Yet, for various reasons, General Riley hadn’t yet retired. He’d instead retained the title of general, stepped away from active service, and concentrated his efforts on training the younger generations.

The young man opposing him wore an ordinary military uniform. He nodded at General Riley’s instructions and held his short sword at a defensive angle. He wasn’t nearly as bulky as the general but almost as tall.

As he faced the experienced general, it seemed the best the

young man could do was dodge and deflect his blows. He did, however, seem to have enough stamina to keep from running out of breath. Using a much shorter sword and facing a master opponent that never gave any openings for an attack, the tenacious young man was putting up a great fight.

The young man held firm with his defensive stance, never moving even to wipe the sweat dripping from his brow.

Then he gasped.

There was a metallic *crash* as the short sword was knocked from the young man's hands.

Without a moment's hesitation, the general swung his sword back around for the finishing blow, but the young man leaped to the side and fell to a knee, narrowly avoiding it. When the general swung again, the young man swiftly raised his scabbard above his head and caught the blow.

"Oho!" the general laughed. "You've improved."

"Surely...this is enough..." the young man huffed.

The general smiled as he saw the commanding fire behind the young man's calm gray eyes, but he didn't let up.

"Fine. You get passing marks for your control over your sword and movements."

But even so, the general waited until he had made sure the young man hadn't relaxed his grip or let his guard down before he drew back his sword. The young man took a step back and sighed with relief.

The tension vanished from the air surrounding them. Even the onlookers, who'd been watching and gulping nervously, felt a wave of relief.

"If you can hang in there that long, I think you'll do just fine," said General Riley, offering out a hand.

The young man returned the scabbard to his waist and accepted the hand up, but that very moment, without any advanced warning, the general swung his short sword toward his neck.

A dull sound echoed throughout the grounds, and a full, satisfied grin spread across the general's face.

Just before the sword made contact with the young man's neck, it collided against an invisible barrier, chipping the tip and sending a large crack running down the blade.

The two men stared at one another, hands still clasped. Then, simultaneously, both men smiled.

“Oho! An instantaneous magical deployment of a concentrated defensive barrier. Very impressive, Prince Edward.”

“I *do* value my life, General Riley.”

The general and Edward were locked in a stalemate, gripping each other’s hands tightly. Both were slightly out of breath and chuckling fearlessly. Suddenly, the other dueling pair ran up to them in a panic.

“What are you two *doing*?!”

“G-General!”

Without taking his eyes off the general, Edward answered nonchalantly. “So you’re done too, Alec? Who won today?”

“Hold your horses! Look, could you just practice normally? I’m begging you. Kevin and I were so worried about you guys we could barely duel ourselves!”

Kevin wore a senior officer military uniform and looked rather harried as he separated General Riley and Edward. The color drained from Kevin’s face as he took the short sword from the general’s clenched hand.

“Y-You weren’t even using a blunted blade?! Did you actually want to hurt him?!”

Edward was practicing his defensive strategies against assassins. However, using a real blade during practice was usually forbidden—even more so against a member of the royal family.

“Look, that’s what he’ll be up against in real life.”

“That’s not the problem here!” Kevin objected. “Edward dying during training would totally defeat the purpose of training at all! This is just practice! Praaac-tiice! Do you understand that word, General?”

General Riley groaned.

“Kevin never lets up on the nagging, despite being my own flesh-and-blood grandson. I *do* take how he’s fairing into account when I attack, you know,” he said, shrugging his shoulders.

“Be that as it may!” Kevin said, bristling indignantly.

However, the general was known as someone who always—even in the military—taught practical fighting skills based on real-world combat.

Moreover, it’d been Edward who came up to General Riley and told him that, not having fought in a while, he wanted to gauge his current skill level.

Only now that he was physically separated from General Riley

did Edward relax his battle-ready posture. The hard barrier of air surrounding him had vanished.

Edward picked up his sword, which had previously been sent flying, and turned to the others with his usual smile.

“I’m sorry for startling you two, but I did learn a lot from that fight.”

“I know, Prince Edward, but still...” said Kevin awkwardly, looking at the broken sword. “And anyway, didn’t Sandona make that blade? My goodness! This one sword is worth my whole salary for the month!”

“It’s sharp, but it’s not strong enough,” the general grunted.

“That’s just because of your brutish strength!” Kevin snapped back. “You’re more than welcome to start acting your age and wither away! And anyway, it broke because Prince Edward’s defensive barrier was as hard as a rock!”

General Riley feigned deafness as Kevin continued to scold him.

The reason Kevin levied complaints against the greatly respected general wasn’t because they were related—it was in large part due to his temperament.

Both General Riley and Kevin had dark, chestnut hair, hazel eyes, and, deep down, very similar personalities.

“Did your defensive barrier really get stronger again, Ed?” asked Alec, unable to hide his surprise.

“Yeah,” Edward replied, brows gently furrowing, “but it seems like it would be better with a little more flexibility.”

“Quite right,” agreed General Riley. “To bring down your enemies, you must entice them to lower their guard by offering some reaction. But for defensive barriers, Sir Dion can help you more than I could... Oh, Finneas has come back from training! He could help you with that, too. Shall I tell him to pay you a visit, Your Highness?”

“Good question...” Edward said, pondering it.

There were many magical techniques that influenced movement. The “defensive barrier” that Edward used was like a shield that could cover his body partially or entirely. There was also a magical technique that could extend the person’s duration in the air while jumping. Harold was particularly good at that technique, and he used it adeptly during mid-air battles.

It took a lot of time to get used to using these techniques.

Naturally, you needed substantial magical power and control to use them at all.

“I’ll try working on it on my own for a little bit longer.”

“You’ll have to get a sword that won’t slip out of your hands ready by our next duel, eh?” teased General Riley.

Edward laughed. “I wonder if you’ll finally manage to get my neck next time, General.”

“Well, I certainly look forward to seeing how you improve, Your Highness.”

With a slight muscle spasm, Alexander sighed and slumped his shoulders. “Don’t have such an unsettling discussion with such calm faces!” he said weakly. “But you know...the fact that you can do that much brings peace of mind from a security perspective.”

“My sword and my magic are for self-defense. I have these gentlemen to depend on for offense,” said Edward, turning to face the men waiting in the wings.

Darios, the other guard knight assigned to Edward for the day, and the healer in charge of first aid all jolted into a perfectly upright standing position.

“You are too modest, Your Highness. And, who knows, with ten more years of tireless basic training, you may be able to defeat me one day!”

“A decade, huh? Yeah, I’ll leave that job to Kevin.”

“If you’re being serious, I’d rather put an end to things here, not have to wait ten years...” grumbled Kevin. “But regardless, it’s already late, so we should call it a day.”

The four men began walking toward the training grounds’ exit. Kevin and Alexander looked rather tired, but Edward and the general looked spirited.

Ever since they had been old enough to hold swords, Edward and Alexander had practiced combat with General Riley and his grandson Kevin.

Kevin was the same age as Harold, Amy’s older brother, and was both their sparring partner and combat instructor. As of late, the general had frequently been coming out to spar with the boys in Kevin’s place.

Although Edward was the Third Prince with the explicit duty not to outshine his older brothers in any way, he was also a member of the royal family. He was naturally very skilled at sparring, and with enough training, he could very well outmatch

the older princes, but this wasn't something anyone—even the Third Prince himself—wanted.

Nevertheless, as a royal, if something were to happen to Edward, it could incite an uprising. Edward's training, therefore, concentrated on defense.

They returned to the antechamber of the training grounds to change clothes and tend to their weapons.

"I'm heading straight back to the dormitories after this. What about you, Ed?" asked Alec.

"I'm going to the Department of Technology."

"For magical tool stuff? Did you start some new research again?"

"The final survey tallies should be coming in tonight. There's no real rush, but I want to analyze it," Edward answered with a smile.

Alexander could tell that Edward was really enjoying himself at the lab. Fiddling around with magical tools seemed to suit him, and Alexander enjoyed hearing about the development of new products.

Kevin, who was a layman when it came to magical tools that weren't weapons, wiped the sweat from his brow, looking confused.

"Survey tallies...?"

"I guess you could call it a follow-up survey over the magical tools that were previously provided to civil officials. It's used to examine their usage and current state of wear."

"Man, that sounds complicated... Is this something the Earl of Northland asked you to do?"

"I was the one who proposed it, but yeah. He left it up to me," Edward admitted, looking a little embarrassed but puffing out his chest proudly.

Joshua Northland, the Director of Technology at the Institute of Magic, believed that capable people should be given the positions and jobs they were best suited for. In his mind, if someone was capable of doing a job, their social standing and age were irrelevant. He didn't even make an exception in this merit-based system for Edward, a member of the royal family.

Unlike my private tutors or my school that ostensibly touts impartiality.

Prince Edward had almost never been judged purely on his abilities and results before working with Joshua.

General Riley and Joshua were two of the few mentors Edward had with whom he didn't have to think about his own social standing.

Edward, now back in his normal clothes, smiled to himself as he realized Joshua giving him these responsibilities had meant he'd met his boss's expectations.

General Riley had been listening to their conversation as he checked the weapons that had been put away.

"Oh!" he suddenly said, as if he'd just remembered something. "Rudolf's son-in-law works at the Department of Technology, right? Is Joshua doing all right?"

"He's in good health. He's just always so busy."

"Haha! So he hasn't changed at all, then!"

Edward grinned as he thought about his boss. Joshua frequently bounced back and forth between different research teams and locations, giving instructions and juggling a dozen things at once, all while carrying out his own research.

In fact, Joshua was so busy that Edward didn't have any time to talk to him privately outside of work. Only occasionally did Edward catch him and ask him to carry letters or gifts back home for Amy. Additionally, outside of that first lecture, they hadn't had any specific conversations about the progress of Amy and Edward's engagement.

On that first day, Edward had told Joshua that he wanted Amy to think of him as a real fiancé, not a fiancé in name only. Since then, Edward knew he'd have no choice but work as hard as he could for Joshua, who would almost certainly be privately judging him.

The result of which was his promotion from a student at Joshua's lectures to Joshua's fellow researcher at the Department of Technology. But Edward wasn't disappointed about this unintended consequence.

"So, are you supposed to learn something from these tallies?" Alexander asked Ed.

"Yes. I was curious if we'd be able to predict the breakdown of magical tools. Being able to do so could be helpful for future developments, of course, and for managing and adjusting the inventory of repair parts for our current magical tools. Some materials are hard to get, and some parts take a long time to make, you see."

“Sounds to me like you’re already thinking like an engineer!” said Alexander.

“No kidding,” said Kevin.

They both looked a little put-off, but Edward just tilted his head, unfazed.

“You think so? But Alec, aren’t you already managing your family’s land?”

“That’s completely different! All I do is give approvals and act as the final overseer. Gramps takes care of a lot of it.”

“You’re doing a lot, too!” said Kevin, putting a hand to his forehead in disbelief. “You two are unbelievable. More capable than your position even requires, and you don’t even realize you’re capable at all!”

“But I heard you’re the supervisor for the fighting competition this year,” Edward pointed out to Kevin.

“The civil officials take care of the hard stuff. I just got the job because the duties on site aren’t so different than what I’d normally do. Well, it is a little difficult coordinating with the guilds and the other kingdoms...”

“You’re kind of a hotshot too, then! You’re a soldier, but you have to verbally spar with those crafty old foxes!”

“I wouldn’t be that disrespectful, Alec,” said Kevin, although he was laughing loudly. “I’m totally inexperienced compared with those guys. But anyway...we’ve decided on the general framework for the participants. Harold’s party applied, too. They submitted their entry form through a guild.”

Alexander jolted forward in surprise.

“Hal’s going to compete?! When’s he coming back to Luducia?”

“Not sure yet. Their rank is so high that they can bypass the preliminary matches, so they might arrive just before the main tournament. I heard that they’re heading to the special hunting zone now.”

“You’re joking! The special zone... Well, that’s Hal for you...”

“You seem pleased, Alec,” said Kevin, “but isn’t there a chance we might have to face them in the tournament?”

In the combat tournament, there were individual matches as well as team matches. Harold’s party, therefore, would be in the same tournament seeding as Edward, Alexander, and Kevin’s team in the group competition.

"I could only dream of going up against Hal!" exclaimed Alec. "Weren't you two in the same year, Kev?"

"Well, yes, but those guys—and especially Harold—are sure to pull out moves we could never predict, so my experience fighting against him won't be very helpful. He's talented enough, but his swordsmanship and his mind are far too reckless."

"Ah... That'll be the Northland blood in him," said General Riley.

"Do you know something we don't, General?" asked Edward.

General Riley nodded slowly, lost in thought, and began to reminisce aloud.

"There was some dispute when Joshua married Isabelle. You may not be aware of this, but Rudolf is quite a doting parent. He told Joshua in no uncertain terms: 'If you can't defeat me, you can't have my daughter!' And so, they agreed to have a sword duel."

"But it's impossible to defeat the margrave one-on-one!" Kevin interjected.

His presumption was more than substantiated. Where General Riley had built his reputation through land battles, Rudolf Wallum had done the same through his fierce sea battles. And he wasn't only skilled at commanding those naval battles, either—his physical strength was almost unmatched.

By contrast, although Joshua had started to make a name for himself in the field of magical tool research, he gave off the impression of a slightly dweeby civil official—which, in fact, he was.

"I can't really imagine the director holding a sword..." Edward muttered.

"Quite so. Everyone thought the duel was over before it had begun. But when it came time to fight, Rudolf was completely caught off guard by Joshua's unique sword technique. Joshua barely managed to win, and that's how he and Isabelle were allowed to marry."

In fact, Joshua's swordsmanship was heavily influenced by the Japanese martial art he had been very familiar with in his past life, *kendo*. His posture and footwork were unthinkable among the fighting styles of this world, and even Rudolf, accustomed to a fierce, dramatic style of fighting, had not seen it coming.

General Riley, who knew both men quite well, cheerfully turned to Edward and gave him some advice.

“Although they’re not related by blood, they’re more alike than you might think. Maybe you should do some extra training too, eh?”

“Well,” said Alec, thumping Edward’s shoulder. “I promise I’ll collect your bones for a funeral afterwards.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence, Alec!” Edward joked, smiling cheerfully. “But if that’s the condition the director gives me, I’ll be more than happy to take up the challenge.”

“That’s the spirit, Your Highness!” cried General Riley, returning his smile.



AFTER getting ready to go out, Isabelle came down the stairs and found Amy standing in front of a large window that opened out to the garden.

Her daughter’s gaze was directed neither at the gardener, hard at work in the flower beds, nor the clear blue sky, but turned down at her hands. At this point, Isabelle was very familiar with that style of thin paper—it was a letter from Edward, delivered by Roodle.

Their near-daily exchanges also helped give Roodle, a retired royal messenger bird with few chances to fly long distances, a chance for some exercise. At first, Amy had often fretted over what to write about, but now she could write to Edward about the most mundane topics with ease.

Although Amy no longer had difficulty admitting to the frequency of these letters, today she was looking at her letter with pinched lips and a troubled expression.

Leaving her clutch bag with her maid, Isabelle approached Amy alone.

“Amy?” Isabelle asked.

“Oh! Mom!” Amy jumped in surprise.

She somehow hadn’t noticed that Isabelle had walked right up to her.

“Are you going out?” Amy asked. “Roodle has, uh, just arrived, and Tigger’s in the garden.”

“So it seems.”

Quickly folding up the letter, Amy tried to smooth over her panic by pointing at the garden. There Isabelle saw the snowy owl

Roodle resting as he usually did on his favorite branch, and Tigger, who had just started to climb the tree himself.

Tigger didn't usually show much interest in humans (except for Amy) or other animals, but whenever Roodle came to visit, Tigger would approach him all on his own. Amy wasn't sure why they got along so well, but she loved watching them together. Seeing animals of different species being friendly with one another always made her feel warm and fuzzy inside.

They didn't even do anything incredibly outrageous or cute together, either. Sometimes Roodle would suddenly stop preening himself and have a staring contest with Tigger, and then, just as suddenly, they would both look away. But Amy thought it was adorable, nonetheless.

Even the servants would rush to the windows whenever Roodle would arrive, just to see those fleeting scenes.

"But if Roodle's here, why do you look so troubled?"

"What?"

"You look a little sad," Isabelle said, glancing at the paper in her hand.

Amy tilted her head, looking puzzled. "I look sad?" she asked, blinking in surprise.

"That's just what it seemed like to me, dear."

Amy was genuinely and totally oblivious.

"It's all right," Isabelle continued with a knowing smile. "Some things are hard to talk to your parents about. It's like that old poem, right? 'Try as I might to mask these feelings, this face of mine betrays me...'"

Amy's eyes widened in panic.

"N-No, it's nothing like that! It's just—I'm just going to the royal riding grounds again next week..."

"Yes, I remember."

Amy had continued to frequent the riding grounds at the royal palace. Since starting school, however, it had become more difficult for her with her busy schedule to visit as spontaneously as she had in the past, so she started to plan her visits in advance.

At the riding grounds, Amy would hang out with the horses Fente and Ventus, who always eagerly awaited her visits, check up on the health of the other horses and the royal messenger birds, and chat about animals with Marvin and the other caretakers. She always had a great time.

“Um, yeah, so,” Amy continued, flapping her hands around erratically, “Ed hasn’t had a day off from his royal duties in a while, and he was supposed to have that day off to come, but he just wrote in this letter that he has to go to work that day after all, so...”

“Ah,” Isabelle said sympathetically, “just when you thought you were going to see him... That is indeed disappointing.”

“Th-That’s not why I’m... He said he was going to introduce me to a new horse he just got, th-that’s all!”

“Of course,” Isabelle said, chuckling.

A few days prior, a foal had been presented to the royal family from the lord of a territory famous for producing well-bred horses. Marvin, the other caretakers, and Edward had all been involved in choosing the horse, and Amy had really been looking forward to hearing about it.

Amy tried explaining this all to her mother, but Isabelle just smiled and nodded with a know-it-all look.

“Whatever you say, dear.”

Amy started to turn crimson under the intensity of her mother’s gaze.

“What?” Amy asked.

Then Isabelle suddenly pinched and stretched out both of her cheeks. Amy’s face immediately went blank with shock, and Isabelle laughed triumphantly.

“They’re so squishy and soft!” Isabelle cooed.

“Whach are chou doing?” Amy attempted to ask through her stretched cheeks.

“It makes me so happy to see *such* close friends!”

“B-Bucht we—we’re nacuht—”

Just as Amy started to squirm in panic, Isabelle let go of her cheeks. Throwing her arms wide, she shrugged innocently.

“Roodle and Tigger, of course! Look, they’re playing again!”

“Oh... R-Right. They’re friends, yeah. Great friends!”

As Amy cradled her smarting cheeks and looked outside, she saw the two animals on the same thick branch, slightly turned to face each other.

Roodle’s neck was stretched out, moving along as he followed the calm swishing of Tigger’s long tail. Amy had no idea what the significance of these behaviors were, but it was certainly adorable to watch.

“Who else did you think I was talking about, Amy?”

“Mom... Aren’t you running late?”

“Oh dear, I have to dash! I’ll be a little late coming home today, so you don’t have to wait for me for dinner.”

“Okay.”

“And Amy... You don’t have to think about it so hard.”

“What?”

Without explaining any further, Isabelle simply put a hand against Amy’s cheek, looking reluctant to leave. Then with one final smile, she set off. Amy watched her retreating figure with a sigh of relief.

Amy looked out the window again. Tigger had stealthily started moving his front paw toward Roodle. Roodle caught him in the act and Tigger quickly snatched back his paw as if nothing had happened. Amy leaned forward against the window.

She’s right. They’re good friends. So why did I immediately think of myself and Edward? Talk about embarrassing...

However, given their conversation before Isabelle’s comment, such a misunderstanding was probably inevitable.

Love was something Amy knew almost nothing about.

Excluding her own brother, Amy could count on one hand the guys her own age she was friends with. She could have amassed some experience in her past life to reference, but even back then, she never even had a crush on a boy, much less a boyfriend.

Her cheeks were starting to feel warm again. Amy brought her hands up to cover them, but the sharp fold of the letter bumped against her face.

Although they were enrolled in the same academy, Edward, who lived in the school dormitories while he carried out his official duties, was always busy. Amy was, too—on her days off, she would use her healing magic to help veterinarians treat animals. Predictably, the two didn’t get chances to meet up very often.

In the four years since they had met at that tea party, Amy had grown to cherish Edward as one of her closest friends.

But Edward was still one of the love interest characters from that otome game, in Amy’s mind. The more distance she could put between them, the better. She should want to cut contact with him entirely.

So Amy thought she would’ve been relieved when she read the letter telling her he couldn’t see her.

But her facial expression had worried her mother, instead...

Amy had never been good at maintaining the poker face most aristocrats excelled at. Her thoughts must have shown on her face.

She hadn't lied about looking forward to hearing about the new foal. But that probably hadn't been the entire reason for how she had reacted... She realized that now.

Being pen pals is more than enough!

As Amy's fist squeezed reflexively, the paper in her hand made a crunching sound. Panicking, Amy softened her grip and gently unfolded the thin paper used exclusively for messenger birds.

Edward's words flowed effortlessly across the paper in his careful script, his language slightly informal—words one would say among friends. How long had it been since they'd been writing letters like this?

I'm sorry, he had written, honestly and sincerely. I'm really disappointed about this, too.

Amy looked over the letter and carefully folded it up once more.

Her thoughts were entwined with the game of her past. She was never fully able to dismiss the possibility that the game itself might "correct" the plot's trajectory at any point... Amy knew fully well that she was still shackled by her fears.

Could I move past this if I knew the identity of the heroine? Amy wondered. Just the thought of meeting her is terrifying... And yet...

Amy reminded herself of her own reality, right at that very moment. It was exchanging letters with Edward every day and the way her heart sank at the news that she couldn't see him.

That was her reality, regardless of if the "invisible hand of the game" was interfering.

Tigger hadn't come back inside yet.

Amy tucked the letter safely away in her pocket, pushed back her shoulders, and stepped out under the clear, blue sky.

Chapter 4: The New Foal

IN Luducia, it was customary for aristocratic children to be accompanied by an adult when they went out.

Whenever Amy went to the royal palace on her own, she would either be accompanied by her mother or the Northland family butler. When the royal palace sent a carriage to pick her up, however, they would also send a knight guard and a maid to accompany her on the journey.

This allowed Amy to go to the castle even on days Isabelle and the butler were too busy to join her. She felt very obliged but also thankful.

Amy had wondered at first if it was really necessary to have a guard come along if a maid was already there to accompany her. However, try as they might to look inconspicuous, they were still very clearly riding in a royal carriage. Even Edward told her that the guard was necessary, and Amy finally came to understand that this was just how things operated in royal life.

Today, she would be riding in a carriage with Alyssa and a guard knight she had never met before. Alyssa had been the maid stationed at Amy's table during the initial tea party held for the engagement candidates. Ever since then, Alyssa had waited on Amy almost every time she had visited the royal palace.

Alyssa was waiting for her in front of the carriage, the comfortable breeze rustling her ginger bangs. When she spotted Amy leaving the house, the two smiled brightly at each other.

"Lady Amy! It's been too long! I'm happy to see you looking so well."

"Thank you for coming, Alyssa!" said Amy, and then adding to the unknown knight, "I haven't yet had the pleasure of making your acquaintance, have I? It's very nice to meet you."

"My name is Scott Kelleher, and I'll be in charge of security today. I'm very happy to make your acquaintance."

After exchanging brief pleasantries, the Northland family servants helped Amy settle into the carriage, and then the carriage

set off.

Alyssa was the daughter of a viscount, and by this point, she had been working at the royal palace long enough to be considered a veteran. She was currently assigned to the Third Prince.

Alyssa never once laughed behind Amy's back at her figure, and the two ladies enjoyed a very close relationship. Isabelle had once noted that when the two of them were together, it was like she was looking at two sisters attending the same elementary school, one in kindergarten and one in the fifth grade.

Quite some time after that first tea party, Amy had learned that the head maid of the royal palace, Hannah, had once been Isabelle's governess. Amy suspected that Alyssa was so often assigned to her because Isabelle had taken advantage of that connection and requested it.

Amy would occasionally pass by maids in the royal palace, giving her scathing looks. Perhaps they were in some way connected to one of the other ladies whose names had been initially announced as Prince Edward's fiancée candidates, or perhaps they even had hopes of marrying him themselves.

The maids attending Amy waited on her close at hand, and there were many chances for them to talk. But if she was met with a sour attitude every time she tried to be pleasant, the visits would be exhausting.

So, even though it was probably overprotective of Isabelle to interfere like that, Amy was rather grateful for it.

The fact of the matter, however, was that Amy's conjectures were totally wrong—Alyssa had taken a liking to Amy at the tea party and had petitioned for the position herself. Amy, however, remained totally unaware of this.

Inside the carriage, free from needing to worry about the public eye, Amy and Alyssa could speak freely and easily.

As Amy wasn't yet of age, she couldn't casually go out and about, and on her days off, she usually just worked with animals. So during these moments, Alyssa, very up-to-date on the goings-on of the royal capital, would fill Amy in on the latest news. Alyssa had much to tell Amy about today, and she was particularly excited about the new pastry shop that had just opened.

"I went with a coworker who works for the crown prince when we didn't have work the other day. She makes sweets from Bakr for Princess Sameen quite often, and she said the ones at the pastry

shop looked and tasted pretty close to the real thing!”

“Really?” asked Amy excitedly. “I wanted to go, but I haven’t really gotten the chance lately. I was thinking I might try to go after the tournament is over.”

Inspired by the wedding of the Crown Prince and Princess Sameen, more and more shops selling foodstuffs and miscellaneous goods from the princess’ homeland of Bakr had started popping up in the royal capital. Even the new confectionary stores were selling exotic candies and sweets—including the pastry shop they were discussing.

“The interior design was really elaborate in the sitting area. You should definitely give it a visit! Men seemed to enjoy themselves there too—there were tons of people on dates and married couples... Isn’t it a shame that His Highness wasn’t able to come to the riding grounds today, Amy?”

“I—I—y-yes, it is. And, um...Hannah and Ventus went with him to the inspection, right?”

“Yes. Everyone went with him this time,” Alyssa replied, grinning.

Amy was still slightly flustered, but she was relieved Alyssa went along with the shift in conversation.

Edward had explained in his letter that he was going on the annual inspection for towns around the royal capital that usually took place this time of the year.

He would’ve been back already if things had gone according to plan, but some urgent matters came up at one of the locations that he needed to deal with, so his return was postponed until tomorrow.

“It looks like we’re almost there,” said Alyssa, noticing that the carriage was gradually slowing down. She started getting their things together and, before long, they arrived at the royal riding grounds.

Scott opened the carriage door for them. Behind him Amy could see that Marvin, the stable master, and Derek, a caretaker, had come to greet her.

“Hello!” Amy said. “Is everyone doing well?”

“Welcome back, Lady Amy. By ‘everyone,’ I assume you mean the horses?” Marvin teased.

“Everyone means everyone! You, Derek, *and* Fente, of course!”

Fente, whose sharp eyes had spotted Amy getting off the

carriage, happily galloped over to her from the other side of the fenced-in exercise grounds.

Amy extended both of her hands out to the beautiful bay mare, whom she had become very close to. Fente impatiently extended her neck over the fence toward her and rubbed her cheeks against Amy's outstretched hands.

Amy's entire face lit up in a smile at their long-awaited reunion, and she responded by petting the base of Fente's neck. After all this time, she was still enthralled by the magnificently glossy feel of her hair.

"I'm sorry I haven't been able to visit at all lately."

"It's all right, Lady Amy. We've heard you've had your hands quite full getting ready for the combat tournament at the end of the month."

"I have! I was a little surprised. I had assumed they would only need my help during the actual tournament... Oh, Fente! You're as beautiful as ever today! I wish I could have seen Ventus, too..."

Fente happily closed her eyes and nuzzled Amy with her nose again. Amy put her arms around her in a hug.

When Amy was asked to be a member of the medical team for the tournament, she thought she'd only be needed the days it was held. Now that they were approaching the final stages of preparation, however, she had been running around with Sir Dion every day, going to meetings, traveling to the venue, and so on...

Healing magicians were scattered far and wide throughout the kingdom. They all had their own patients to care for, so even though the athletic tournament was a huge event sponsored by the kingdom itself, it was difficult for them to drop everything to focus solely on the tournament.

During the event, the healers would be stationed in the tournament venue and work in shifts. The advanced preparations, however, were to be done by "experienced healing magicians living in the royal capital who were not engaged in active service but could take on the responsibility." For this year's athletic tournament, that meant the preparations were left entirely to Sir Dion.

No one could say he wasn't competent enough for the job.

The problem was—perhaps because he used his own extraordinary abilities as a baseline—he was prone to overestimate the abilities of the typical healing magician. Additionally, many of

the healing magicians with whom he dealt with were his former students. With that history, they would often cower away or be overly conciliatory, which sometimes made things go awry.

One of Sir Dion's apprentices had come back from training abroad and become a coordinator, but he had been away from the royal capital for a while to take care of some delicate preparations.

It had been at this time when Amy, who occasionally happened to be at the venue where these meetings were held, had offered to help out. The other volunteers begged her to continue working with Sir Dion, which was how she began helping with preparations.

Much of Amy's work consisted of conferencing and mingling with adults and checking medical equipment and flow lines. The memories of her previous life stopped in high school, and as her only work experience then had been working part-time at a supermarket, this was the first time Amy had ever experienced duties like this.

The work had made her very busy, even forcing her to take some time off from school, but when the other volunteers looked at her with such gratitude in their eyes, Amy felt good knowing that she was helping others.

"Sir Dion had something else to do today, so he's taking the day off, too. I can stay until the evening, so let's go on a walk later, Fente!"

Fente tapped her front hoof against the ground like she understood exactly what Amy said. The horse caretakers smiled as Amy walked down to pet the other horses that had gathered by the fence, chattering away at them.

Nobles often came to the stables at the royal palace, either for a tour or to observe. But they would often make excessive demands, try to pick fights with the staff, or act haughtily toward the caretakers. Their children would also play pranks on the horses.

On the other hand, Amy was very fond of animals, which was rare for aristocratic women, and she never acted condescending toward the caretakers, whether they were lower-ranking aristocrats or commoners.

Amy was aware of status differences and acted appropriately, but she always remained even-tempered, never giving way to bouts of sudden anger or anything like that. That alone made her very popular among the commoner employees and assistants.

And unlike his older brothers, Prince Edward had been a frequent visitor to the stables since he was a young boy, so Marvin and the workers knew his personality and mannerisms very well. In accordance with the policy of the royal palace and the wishes of the king and queen, they couldn't openly show their support for him, but everyone working at the stables was incredibly partial to the Third Prince.

Whichever way you looked at it, Amy, the Third Prince's chosen fiancée candidate, could always expect a warm welcome at the stables.



AFTER spending some time with the other horses at the outdoor riding grounds, the group headed to the stables. Foals were raised separate from the adult horses there.

Marvin turned to Amy with a twinkle in his eye.

"The new foal is a little antsy. He's not quite used to us yet. Actually, I was hoping he'd get better after you touched him, Lady Amy."

"My hands can't work *that* kind of magic, Marvin," Amy responded light-heartedly.

Healing magic could heal injuries and relieve pain, but there was no magic that could alter something's personality or disposition. Amy knew Marvin was well aware of this, and they both laughed.

"It might help!" Alyssa chimed in. "When Amy used her healing magic on me, it made my mood way better!"

"Alyssa..."

"It's true! It was like a warmth spread throughout my chest, and I felt totally at ease."

"Surely that's just because I have warm hands! Look," Amy protested, moving over to Alyssa's side and grabbing her hand as they walked. Amy's hands were small and chubby, like the hands of someone much younger than she really was.

"It does feel pretty nice..." Alyssa admitted.

"Because it's so squishy?" Amy asked, giggling.

"I suppose so!"

Behind the two girls, laughing together now, the deeply

serious expression on the guard knight's face softened.

Scott finally began to understand why all the other knights had been telling him that they were jealous he was put in charge of security today. The guard duties he was performing were exactly the same as on other occasions, but there was a huge difference between Amy and the other aristocrats, who were arrogant and ungrateful for the protection.

Scott also remembered being told to be careful, because it was easy to be lulled into a false sense of security when guarding the ever-cheerful Amy, so he had rearranged his composure when they arrived at the peaceful stables.

"My mom and my friends always grab hold of my hands because they're so warm."

"Yes, I certainly understand the feeling!"

Amy's well-cared-for hands were certainly flawlessly white, smooth, and very soft. The real reason for that desire, however, was the special healing power inside of Amy, of which she was still unaware.

Although Amy had heard stories of people called "Protectors" who had such abilities, she simply mused to herself, *There are some really amazing people out there!*

Amy had been reincarnated as an aristocrat and had become the Third Prince's fiancée candidate, but in her previous lifetime, she had always felt like a side character in her own life, and that mentality remained in full force. Amy pictured herself as so thoroughly ordinary and unremarkable, she fought with all she had to try to escape the role of the villainess.

So naturally, it never dawned on her that she might be one of those important people—those "Protectors."

But in reality, every time Amy visited the riding grounds, even the animals she had simply touched—without any healing magic—would be in a better mood. Marvin had picked up on that early on, when she'd started to visit the riding grounds regularly.

Marvin had seen many caretakers in his time who were loved by the animals, but there was just something different about how they acted with Amy... The phrase "blessed with protection from the spirits" crossed Marvin's mind briefly, but he just shook his head.

For generations, Protectors had all been either descendants of the royal family or devout priests.

Moreover, many of them only came to the realization that they were Protectors in the sunset years of their lives. No one in their right mind would think that this bubbly, exuberant young girl could really be a Protector.

Besides, people officially recognized as a Protector were placed in a unique position in society and separated from their families.

It would be one thing if they were in a time of war or if she were a destitute orphan, but such a fate would be very hard on an ordinary girl in this day and age.

Just in case, Marvin had only made vague allusions to these worries of his to Edward. Edward had listened in silence but then drew a look of comprehension. When Marvin had seen that, he put a stop to his inquiries into the matter.

Amy, totally unaware of all of this, continued to march forward. An exercise field roughly the size of a school gymnasium came into view. Half of it was outdoors, and several foals were gathered beyond the low fence.

Slightly separated from the group of foals was a single gray foal with slightly black feet, standing alone.

Physically, the foal was very well-balanced. Compared with the other foals, the gray one alone held itself in a way that made her think it would grow into a magnificent horse one day.

"That must be the new foal!" quietly exclaimed Amy, showing great restraint in walking forward without breaking into an excited run.

"Yes, his name is Leni," Marvin told Amy in a whisper to avoid spooking him.

"He's beautiful! He's got a smart look about him, too."

"He is quite sharp. It's probably why he's so alert."

The new foal had only just been weaned and separated from his mother.

His eyes blinked anxiously, darting this way and that worriedly. He would start walking and abruptly stop in a restless manner, but he quickly darted away when the other foals tried approaching him.

"Wild horses originally lived in herds. Some horses need some time adjusting to a new environment, but... I had hoped he would adjust quickly," Marvin admitted, scratching his temple with a finger awkwardly.

Marvin had been involved with horses for a long time, ever

since he was a young man in the army. He'd mentioned before that, because he hadn't ever married, he felt like his subordinates and the horses were his children.

He was naturally protective—when Edward would secretly come to the stables as a young child, Marvin would keep a watchful, silent eye over him. So it was natural for Marvin to worry about Lenis as he wandered around the field, flicking his ears restlessly.

As Marvin looked on silently, Lenis noticed and timidly approached him. Just a few days before, Lenis had finally started to come up to Marvin—and only Marvin—on his own.

Lenis leaned his head out to Marvin, but he averted his gaze from the new visitors out of fear and stomped his front feet on the ground. Amy knew stomping was one behavior horses did to show they were unhappy.

Lenis was breathing heavily. Marvin smiled apologetically as he gently patted his back soothingly.

"This is what I was talking about. It wasn't so bad at the beginning, but he's getting harder and harder to handle by the day."

"He hasn't been sick before, has he?"

"No. I've checked his pedigree for illnesses in his family and his own medical history. There's nothing."

The lord surely wouldn't have gifted the royal family a horse that had any problems. The most logical conclusion, therefore, was that he'd become skittish because of the change of environment.

But Marvin was concerned—normally, a foal would gradually get used to the change and improve, but Lenis seemed to have done the opposite and gotten worse.

"I'd like to get him started with learning how to ride with someone on his back, but that would be quite difficult with how he is now..."

"Maybe it would be a nice change of pace for him to run around in a big area?" Amy suggested.

But Marvin looked troubled and explained that not only was he afraid of the other horses, but lately, he'd started not wanting to go outside anymore.

They could always wait and see what happened, but if Lenis didn't get any better, dealing with the situation later down the road might get more complicated.

The rearing and training of a gifted horse drew attention from

the royal family and the gift giver. The caretakers involved in raising the foal could never rest in peace until the foal was a properly trained and reared adult horse.

Lenis's large, wide dark brown eyes darted around watchfully, but it didn't look like he would bite.

But he was still breathing heavily, even though he hadn't run at all.

His breathing is so fast... If nothing's wrong with his heart or lungs, he's probably just nervous, but...

Healing magic could only heal ailments—diagnosing those ailments was left up to the medical doctor. Amy didn't have enough knowledge or experience yet to draw conclusions like that.

But if he's uncomfortable, thought Amy, he'll probably want some comforting... Like when people rub their tummies when they have a stomachache or when kids fall and scrape their knees and want a kiss to make it better.

Amy reached out her hand to the foal.

"Oh! Careful, Lady Amy! I know I joked about touching him before, but it would be a disaster if you were to get hurt!"

"It's okay. I'm just introducing myself. If he doesn't like it, I'll stop. Hello there, Lenis. My name is Amy."

Amy moved her hand very slowly so Lenis could see it out of the corner of his eye. Lenis flinched when her hand made contact with him, and his entire body started to tremble, but that was the extent of it.

As a foal, Lenis was much smaller than Fente. Amy didn't have to look up at all to meet his eyes.

Amy smiled as she quietly spoke to him. "I don't want to scare you. I just want to make you feel relaxed."

Then, she gradually started to sense something through the palm of her hand that was pressed against Lenis.

What is this? Could I be picking up on his feelings?

Whenever Amy would touch a seriously injured animal to use healing magic on them, she'd been able to sense the pain they were feeling and hints of distress.

But what she was feeling now was a little different.

Amy sensed a heaviness... She felt a cloudy image in her mind...

Weariness clung to her entire body. Her head felt hot and fuzzy. All she wanted to do was rest, but her weariness made her

feel her restless and unsettled.

Amy was fortunate enough to not have experienced these sorts of feelings in this life, but she remembered them very well from her previous life.

Like the morning after staying up all night to cram for a test the next day, or the day after staying up all night to read a book I couldn't put down...

"He hasn't been sleeping well?" Amy muttered quietly to herself.

Amy had often heard of people feeling miserable after a change in their environment made it hard for them to get to sleep at night. Some particularly sensitive people couldn't even get to sleep if their pillows were changed.

Amy tilted her head, wondering if it was even possible for horses to suffer from lack of sleep.

Horses, like other animals, go through several periods of light sleep throughout the entire day. Very young foals or adult horses in a very safe environment can lie down and sleep, but even then, they won't sleep for large chunks of time like humans do.

Horses can even get restful sleep snoozing while standing up. Could Lenis not even do that?

"I see... It's his sleeping environment, then?"

"What?!" Amy asked, twitching in surprise. She had no idea Marvin's sharp ears had picked up on her quiet muttering.

Her ramblings were pure conjecture—far too baseless to be taken seriously.

"I've been very careful about his meals and the temperature, but I've turned a blind eye to his sleeping hay. I'll check it out right away."

"H-Hold on! It really was just an idea, and plus, I know you guys always keep the stable hay clean!"

"Well, it wouldn't hurt to check, now would it?"

Ignoring Amy's attempts to stop him, Marvin asked a nearby worker to bring him Lenis's rearing history documentation. The worker fetched the documents at once, which revealed that wood shavings—in other words, sawdust—was often used as bedding material in Lenis's native territory.

Both straw and sawdust were commonly used as horse bedding.

"That makes sense... We only use straw here, so we should get

some sawdust too, huh? We can get some of that in a jiffy.”

“But it might be totally unrelated!”

“That’s all right, Lady Amy. Just having something new I can try out makes me feel much better.”

“Really? Well, I suppose that’s fine, then... But please don’t get your hopes up, okay? Oh!” Amy suddenly giggled. “That tickles, Leni!”

Perhaps affected by Marvin’s relieved and uplifted mood, Leni nudged his nose against Amy’s face. He rustled around her neck and hair, like he was sniffing her. For some reason, it looked like all his caution toward Amy had suddenly melted away.

Amy would’ve been happy enough for Leni to let her touch him, but the fact that Leni himself took the initiative to get closer to her made her positively thrilled.

Leni was practically glued to Amy. She slowly moved the hand she had pressed against him, petting him. She moved it as gently as possible, trying to soften his mood with her own slightly elevated temperature.

I really wish there were some magic that could let humans and animals talk to one another!

Amy was sure Leni knew right away what had been making him feel bad. She wondered how this new place looked in his bright, clear eyes. Maybe he missed his home territory and the mother he was separated from...

Leni had been brought to the riding grounds of the royal palace completely at the discretion of humans, but Amy hoped that, at the very least, he wouldn’t find it a terrible place to live.

In the place of words Leni couldn’t understand, Amy pressed her forehead against his.

“I hope you feel better, Leni.”



When the foal closed his eyes, visibly pleased by the action, the rest of the party let out a sigh of relief.

Then, suddenly, Leni grabbed the scarf hanging around Amy's shoulders and pulled it off.

Amy made a noise of surprise. Marvin tried to recover the cloth, but the foal trotted away from the fence and folded his back legs, sitting on the ground with the scarf still in his mouth.

"Are you okay?!" Alyssa asked Amy. "Oh no, your scarf!"

"It's all right, Alyssa," Amy hastily reassured her before calling out, "You can't eat that, okay, Leni?"

Scott made a coughing noise, choking down the laugh that had threatened to erupt at Amy's unusual priorities. Despite his best efforts, he just couldn't maintain his guard-like stoicism around Amy.

Before Marvin and Alyssa could work up into a panic, Leni gently folded his front legs, trapping the scarf underneath his body, proudly laid down, and closed his eyes.

One of the caretakers started making his way over to retrieve the scarf.

"Wait! Don't go!" Amy called him to a halt.

The caretaker stopped and the entire party stood there, watching the foal. Before long, they could hear the sounds of his even, deep, relaxed breathing.

"What on earth...?"

"Did Leni...fall asleep?"

Marvin stared at Amy in mute amazement. Meanwhile, she avoided his gaze and covered her cheeks with her hands in embarrassment.

"Oh no! If he can sleep this soundly, there's no way he was sleep deprived! I'm sorry for assuming, Marvin. I was totally wrong!"

"Far from it, Lady Amy! You weren't wrong at all!"

"What? But he's..."

Amy turned bright red and continued to apologize for making incorrect assumptions, but Marvin kept shaking his head.

"Leni was always restless, even in front of the caretakers. Frankly, I never expected that he would relax in front of you like this after only your first meeting."

"Really?" asked Amy.

“The Lenis I know would have run away, but he would never have laid down in front of us.”

Lenis slept on the other side of the fence dividing them. Amy’s scarf was spread out like a pillow underneath him.

Everyone breathed a sigh of relief at the sight of the defenseless foal, his eyes soundly shut and his entire body utterly relaxed.

“It’s certainly not hurting, at any rate. I’ll try out the new stable bedding, too, and see how it goes.”

“...If you say so,” Amy said, still dubious.

Amy then left the stables, leaving the sleeping Lenis in the caretakers’ hands.

After that, Amy visited with other animals, had her usual teatime with the workers to catch up on the latest information, and then enjoyed riding around on Fente.

She tried to check in on Lenis during that time, but although he woke up several times, he seemed to always go back to sleep. Amy wasn’t sure if his sleep deprivation was resolved or if he was just snoozing, but his caretakers looked very pleased, so she thought he would probably be just fine.



THE sun was just setting as they started preparing the carriage to take Amy home. Having not been to the riding grounds for quite some time, Amy had been enjoying herself so much that she’d stayed later than she had planned.

Although she was returning with a maid and a guard, Marvin was deeply apologetic for letting a young lady stay until such a late hour.

“I shouldn’t have held you up.”

“I had fun! Plus, look—I borrowed this today,” Amy insisted, patting the pocket inside her dress.

“Oh, right! The special machine Director Northland made.”

Amy, like her father Joshua, often lost track of time. Inside her pocket was a special magical communication device Joshua had made for his family’s private use.

It was slightly different from the devices the royal palace employees carried around—this one included a GPS-like location-

tracking functionality. Moreover, if the machine sensed any abnormal movements, it would immediately send word to her father.

The world they lived in was generally peaceful, and their kingdom wasn't particularly unsafe, but because Amy was an aristocrat and connected with the royal family, there was always a possibility she could be targeted.

If anything were to happen, gathering manpower and launching a search would inevitably take time.

Joshua had made it entirely for personal use, so, ignoring any aspect of profitability, he had used a magical stone with an incredibly high grade of purity. The sheer cost of the tool alone was enough to make Amy a little wary about being responsible for it.

Although she was nervous carrying it around, it was certainly easier than traveling with more guards in tow, so she'd slip it into her pocket whenever she went out.

Incidentally, she had already used the tool to tell her father that she would be coming home late.

He'd told her to be careful coming home. It sounded like he was working late again today. Amy grinned to herself as she imagined the unimpressed expression her mother would make when she found out.

"I think I'll be able to come again after the tournament."

"All right. I am very sorry about your scarf, Lady Amy."

"It's really okay, Marvin! I've told you a thousand times not to worry about it."

"I appreciate your kindness, milady... And you can leave Lenis to me. Like always, if anything happens, I'll send you a letter."

"Yes, please do! Then I suppose I'll... Huh?"

In the middle of her farewell to Marvin and the other caretakers, just as she leaned onto Scott's hand to get into the carriage, she heard noises of surprise from the workers across the road.

Their attention was directed at the end of the road that led to the riding grounds.

Someone was racing a dark horse down the road, heading right for Amy, but under the darkening sky, she could neither tell the exact color of the horse nor the face of the person gripping the reins.

"Lady Amy, get behind me!" Scott yelled at once, readying

himself in a defensive stance.

"Don't worry, we'll protect you!" said Alyssa, following suit.

Judging from the workers' surprise, it didn't seem to be someone they were expecting. The rider seemed to be skilled on horseback, and the distance between them was rapidly shrinking with every blink of her eye. The visitor was nearly upon them.

Although they were on the outskirts of the grounds, they were still within the royal palace. There were gatekeepers and men stationed on patrol throughout the grounds. It was hard to imagine someone nefarious could have broken through all those guards...

Then...who is it?

To calm the uneasiness welling up inside her from the tense atmosphere, Amy unconsciously clutched the locket hidden under her dress.

The same moment that Amy finally perceived the horse rider, Marvin called out in a surprised voice tinged with relief.

"Ventus?! And Your Highness!"

But he wrote that he wouldn't be able to make it back today...!

"Ed...?" Amy asked weakly as he pulled up right beside them.

"Thank goodness! I made it!" Edward managed to say between gulps of air.

He looked exhausted and his hair was disheveled, but it *was* Edward, in the flesh.

Edward stopped Ventus and slid off. Marvin came rushing up to him. Edward gave Marvin the bridle and asked him to look after Ventus. Then his attention returned to Amy.

He walked decisively up to her.

Scott and Alyssa stepped aside and bowed, but Amy just stood there frozen in shock, eyes wide and blinking rapidly.

B-But the letter...and everyone said...

"You—you weren't supposed to come back today."

"You're right. That was the plan, but I really wanted to see you, so I rushed home."

Edward took Amy's hand in his own, gently squeezed it, and held it up, just as he had so many times before. His eyes sparkled happily.

"Ventus made great time. I guess he wanted to get home today just as much as I did."

"R-Right..."

"Am I bothering you, Amy?"

“Wha— N-No! I’m just surprised!”

She had been told she wouldn’t be able to see him.

But the person she was disappointed she couldn’t see...the person she wanted to see...was standing right in front of her.

As this reality finally clicked in her mind, Amy felt heat rise to her face. The hand Edward still held grew just as hot.

If the sun had been any higher, the whole party would have been able to see her blushing as clear as day.

Amy grew flustered, as she couldn’t hide her reddening cheeks with her hand occupied. Noticing this, Edward’s smile stretched across his face.

“Do you think you could say some nice things to Ventus later? He worked really hard to get me here on time.”

“O-Of course I can! I-I, uh... Ed, I...”

“Hm? What’s that?”

Hand! I want you to let go of my hand, but the words are so hard to say when you’re smiling at me like that!

“It’s, uh... It’s just...”

“Yes?”

“...Welcome back.”

In the end, the only thing she could say was a standard greeting.

But Ed seemed to get even happier at this—and a smile slipped through Amy’s lips back at him.

“I’m glad I was able to see you today, too,” she confessed.

They say that yawning is infectious, but is happiness too? Amy vaguely wondered through the fog in her mind as the sun set over the riding grounds.

Chapter 5: A Slight Change in Plans

EDWARD was supposed to come back to the royal capital tomorrow... So why is he here now?

Before Amy could wrap her head around the situation, Edward's guard finally arrived behind him. Darios dismounted from his horse, his traveling suit of armor clanging with every movement. His face looked quite intimidating on a normal day, but now Amy could clearly see annoyance in his expression, too.

"Your Highness..." he started.

"Oh, Darios! Ventus was a little fast, huh?"

"There wasn't anything 'little' about it! Not to mention you going down those deserted back-roads you seem to know so well..."

So Edward hadn't come by the main roads... Amy was relieved he hadn't bulldozed through the main street of the royal capital on his way here, although she knew he wasn't the type of person to do something like that anyway.

She had also been worried about his security, but with Darios following him like this, it had probably been fine.

As Amy pondered all this, Edward turned toward her again.

"Anyway, you were just about to head home, weren't you, Amy? If you wait just a moment, I can accompany you on the ride."

"But you just got here!"

"Yeah. I'm not fit to ride in a carriage with you looking like this, of course," said Edward, shrugging. "So I'll just need to quickly change clothes."

Looking over him again, Amy realized he certainly did look shabby, caked in dust and sweat. As a prince, he normally looked so tidy and put-together—it was the first time she had seen him looking like this.

He must be so exhausted after such a long ride. But...just how hard did he push himself because he wanted to see me? Amy wondered.

The correct response would be to thank him, politely refuse his offer, and tell him to get some rest. Amy logically knew this, but words of refusal didn't leave her mouth.

"It's all right," Edward added brightly and reassuringly, seeing through Amy's hesitation. "I'm still supposed to be out of town, technically, so I don't have anything scheduled for tomorrow. I'll see you home and then come back and get some rest."

"O-Okay... Well, in that case..."

Edward nodded happily and then informed the coachman to delay his departure.

They all returned to the stables. Edward downed a quick glass of water standing up before heading to his drawing room to get ready. In the meantime, Amy heard about the details of their journey from Darios.

"So Hannah and the others left separately?"

"That's correct. Only His Highness and I returned on horseback. The others will arrive tomorrow, just as scheduled."

"Um... What about the job?" Amy quietly whispered to him.

Edward didn't seem to be the type of person that would neglect his official duties, but Amy just wanted to be sure. Darios put down his own glass of water and smiled.

"Prince Edward finished all his planned inspections and sympathy calls. To tell you the truth, when we visited the territory that had apparently been added on to the end of the trip, the pretext for the visit was quite different than what they had told us."

"Different how?"

"There wasn't even an inspection planned. They wanted the prince there to wine and dine him," said Darios, shrugging.

"Well... Some people in that territory are real pieces of work," Alyssa chimed in as she poured him some more water from the decanter, looking exasperated.

Amy suddenly understood.

It must have been about a faction dispute... Ed never did like those sorts of things.

The political faction dispute was wound up in a struggle for succession in the royal family. That was a subject Edward hated more than anything else. It now made total sense to Amy why Edward would leave his servants behind and use Amy as an excuse to leave as soon as possible.

It had already been well established that the next king of Luducia would be the First Prince, who even married a woman from an allied kingdom.

Although the next prince, the Second Prince, displayed

proficiency in the military, he never once hesitated to declare himself the advisor of his older brother for the rest of his days.

With those secure positions ensuring the next generation of royalty, there was no obvious animosity between the aristocratic factions that supported the Crown Prince and the Second Prince. There was no benefit in currying favor with the Third Prince, placed lowest in the order of succession and with no plans to assume an important position in the future.

But a direct connection to the royal family, no matter how small, was very tempting for some aristocrats.

Perhaps his itinerary there had somehow uncovered the true motives of the feudal lord. There were certainly people who'd enjoy such attentions, and even Edward would surely take them in stride if he deemed it unavoidably necessary.

But Edward had seen through it right away and had advanced his schedule to leave early.

"But..."

The Kingdom of Luducia had a monarchy, but it was not an absolute monarchy. The wishes of the aristocratic lawmakers and the civil officials were taken into account.

Scheduling and coordinating diplomacy visits fell under the purview of the civil officials. Amy had sometimes met them at the royal palace, and they all looked brilliant and hard to deal with.

As people who took great pride in their jobs, the civil officials probably wouldn't find Edward's unscheduled, independent actions very amusing.

As the Third Prince, it wasn't a good idea to openly clash with the civil officials who managed most of the practical business. But Edward was a very impressive person, with even Amy's father coming around to say, "He shows a surprising amount of promise." Maybe the civil officials had foreseen this situation happening.

"He carried out the fewest obligations possible while still fulfilling his duty, so there won't be a problem," Darios reassured her.

"I suppose you're right," Amy said, but her expression was still troubled.

"His Highness would have left earlier," he continued, smiling. "He wanted to leave yesterday."

"What?"

"He kept saying how it's been so long since you came to the

palace...”

“O-Okay, I get it, Darios!”

Even though she had regained her composure, she didn’t want another embarrassing surprise attack. She covered her warming cheeks with her hands in an attempt to cool them down, but it was totally pointless—her hands were hot, too.

Edward and Marvin returned to see Darios and Alyssa smiling at Amy, who was in a frazzled state.

“Looks like you guys are having fun!”

“Ed!”

“Sorry for the wait. Shall we get going?”

“A-Already? Will you be all right without a little breather first?”

“Yeah, it’s fine. The director will get worried if you get home too late. Plus, I can rest in the carriage while seeing you home.”

Edward took Amy’s hand and helped her up from the sofa where she had been sitting.

With the Third Prince joining Amy for the ride, the security arrangements shifted. Marvin took up the duty of coachman, and Darios and Scott rode on horseback alongside them as guards. Alyssa remained at the royal palace, so Edward and Amy were alone inside the carriage.

Amy had been alone with him in a carriage before, but she suddenly felt nervous in the small space illuminated by tiny lights.

Edward let out a quiet chuckle at Amy, who felt awkward and clumsy for some reason.

“Marvin told me what you did for Lenis. Thank you,” he said.

“Oh, it was nothing! I didn’t do anything, really.”

“None of the caretakers seem to share that opinion. I think he got better because of you, too.”

Even though Amy waved both of her hands and tried to persuade him otherwise, Edward brushed it aside. Then he took one of her hands in his own and his eyes fell, staring at their hands joined together.

Amy’s breath stopped completely in surprise. He held her hand gently, as if he were handling something very fragile.

Y-You can let it go now!

It wasn’t unusual for an escort to take her hand, so Amy had no idea why her heart went crazy every time he did it today.

If the inside of the carriage were any brighter, Amy would

have seen Edward looking at her hand like he was holding the world's most precious treasure, and she certainly would've become much more flustered than she already was.

Sidestepping many of the obvious topics, Amy forcibly steered the conversation in another direction.

"A-Anyway...were you all right on your trip, Ed?"

"Oh, yes. Darios told you, I suppose? I think it was just a test."

"A test?"

"I think the civil officials wanted to see how the 'Third Prince' would react when someone approached him that just wanted to use him." Edward spoke looking slightly out into the distance, like he was talking about someone else entirely.

Even if the political situation in Luducia appeared peaceful at a glance, there were always people who wanted to change it. People might even occasionally try to deliberately cause chaos to achieve their aims.

Was the Third Prince an easy target others could take advantage of, or, conversely, was he capable of using the people who approached him? The current political situation and Edward's own position and role—Edward had seen that the purpose of the last stop on his trip had been checking his understanding of the status quo.

"They don't need a Third Prince that can be useful, but they can't have him be easily manipulated either," said Edward, his voice filled with bitterness and resignation.

He brought their hands to rest on his lap and gave Amy's a little squeeze.

Edward had always smiled softly. He never once complained. He had never spoken to Amy about this sort of stuff before, so she had no idea what facial expression was most appropriate to listen to him with.

As the light swayed in the carriage, it made it hard for them to clearly see the other's face, and Amy was rather glad about that now.

"But you don't have to worry about my duties or the civil servants. That is...I mean...that's what you were worried about, right?"

"Yeah... I was also worried about your duties... But..."

From Amy's perspective, the highest-ranking, oldest family in Luducia—the royal family—was bound by a very restricted way of

life.

Both in her previous life, when she was just an ordinary citizen, and in this life, where she was born into nobility, her impression of royalty was the same.

Amy was born to the same parents she had in her previous life, and she was not very sought after as an aristocrat.

But Edward was different.

His position was similar to Alexander's, the son of a duke, but the burdens they carried were beyond comparison. Perhaps he was so used to the restrictions, having lived with them since the day he was born, that they didn't trouble him. Certainly, much more was asked of the older princes.

But it was still a heavy burden.

Amy knew Edward might feel uncomfortable if he found out she felt such sympathy for him. From the rumors she occasionally heard and the stories from her father, she knew Edward's position as the Third Prince was a difficult one.

There was probably a lot he had to accept and overcome. He probably lived in an environment where he didn't have many people he could rely on.

He's so strong... Just like a "prince" ought to be.

He seemed so different from Amy, who was quick to want to run away from difficult situations. What he showed her just now was probably one side of himself—a side that slipped out because he was so tired.

But showing this raw side of himself in front of another person was certainly much harder for him than wearing his usual mask. After the many, many hours they had spent together, Amy knew him well enough to know that.

Edward's gaze toward Amy was the same as it had always been. His silver-flecked gray eyes were always calm, but they looked even softer when it was just the two of them.

When he smiled at her, her chest felt restless.

Amy would always tell herself the reason she felt restless around him was because she was being cautious around the love interest character she was supposed to stay away from...*until now.*

"I was more worried about you than your work," Amy confessed.

But now...

"Amy?"

“For me, nothing helps better than a hug from Tigger, but...”

Amy took the hand Edward had been holding hers with, lifted it with both hands, and gently placed his palm against her cheek.

Edward was understandably shocked—it was the first time Amy had touched him like this.

Amy couldn't comfort him over his upbringing as a prince, nor could she remove the burdens he carried with him. She was well aware of that.

That's why...

“Everyone says that when they touch me, they feel better. If that's true, I hope it will work on you and make you feel better, too.”

“...Yeah. It might be too effective,” he quietly let slip out before covering his mouth with his other hand, eyes determinedly looking anywhere but at Amy.

Amy and Edward both blushed up to their ears, both quite thankful that it was so dark inside the carriage.





ALTHOUGH Edward was a student, he still had many official duties as a member of the royal family, including going on inspections, sympathy calls, and performing certain ceremonies.

Edward had never complained about his schedule, which was put together by the civil servants with some consideration for the school's curriculum, but this time, things were different.

Edward was in Baron Burleigh's territory, in the baron's distinguished guest room on the second floor of his estate, overlooking the inner courtyard. Hannah handed Edward, who was standing beside the sunlit window with his arms crossed, a pair of gloves.

"Here you are, Your Highness."

"Oh. Thank you, Hannah."

He had been to many events on this journey, including attending a memorial ceremony for fallen soldiers, and Hannah had accompanied him to prepare his clothes and everything else. He took the gloves from the long-standing head maid, put them on, and finished getting dressed.

It had been a full day since he'd arrived at the last stop in his journey, the territory of Barron Burleigh. There had been a so-called farmland inspection that had been hastily added on, but there had been almost nothing worth seeing. He'd finished all his duties the same day he had arrived.

They weren't that far from the royal capital, and the weather was perfectly fine for traveling. If they had stuck to the original plan, he would've been on the way back yesterday or this morning at the very latest.

And yet Edward's party was still here, and they were even scheduled to spend the night.

He could only guess that the intentions of the civil servants who made that decision was not the inspection at all but rather the event currently being prepared in the courtyard below.

"Oh my! Isn't that the head of Wizzle & Co. over there?"

"It looks like it. I've heard he's been expanding his markets recently, and Baron Burleigh has many connections."

Preparations for the welcome luncheon, which doubled as a

garden party, were underway in the courtyard under their window. Invitees were already starting to gather there.

It wasn't uncommon for social events to be set up, either formally or informally, in the places the royal family traveled. But unlike his older brothers, Edward never really had the chance to go to them.

After experiencing the hastily cobbled-together schedule of the day, it became clear to Edward that this stop was deliberately arranged with the knowledge of the civil officials. Their ulterior motives were transparent—to see how the Third Prince would react when faced with a conspirator and to get a sneak peek into the makeup of the aristocrat's political factions.

With that said, not everyone invited to the event would come with an agenda. Some people would come purely because they wanted to greet him.

He would put the guests whispering sweet words to him under special watch, judge whether or not they had any special interests or ambitions, and deal with them appropriately.

That level of effort was simple enough, even for Edward.

I wouldn't have a problem if it was just that, but...

What disheartened him was the other motive—discovering if he was susceptible to such advances.

"If I may be so bold..." Hannah began, "they seem to be overtly doubting your intentions."

Edward gave her a resigned smile—their thoughts about the affair were one and the same.

"You don't usually speak so harshly," was all he said.

As they looked down at the venue, Hannah sighed on Edward's behalf.

The tables and chairs were arranged in a line in the garden, and the assorted dishes and sweets vividly reminded Edward of a certain tea party once held at the royal palace.

There were nearly as many aristocratic ladies down in the courtyard as there were at the palace that day, too.

"That they arranged such a thing when you already have Lady Amy..." Hannah lamented.

"Well, we haven't made anything official yet."

"You might as well have."

There had been more pressure put on Edward to "make the engagement official, and soon." Most of the time it was indirectly

referenced, but there had been times the civil officials came out and said it directly.

Edward had been given an extension of time to decide on his own fiancée by the king, queen, and his two older brothers, but it had been given privately.

However, it was natural for the civil officials to decide upon the Third Prince's future—currently a wild card—as soon as possible to strengthen the future political climate.

Even Edward could concede that it was somewhat disadvantageous to continue such a precarious situation for so long. But with Amy, there were certain things he couldn't give up.

Edward looked up from the courtyard, trying to distract himself. Unlike the turmoil raging inside of him, the clear sky above him was cerulean and tranquil.

It was the same sky above the royal capital.

Amy was going to visit the royal riding grounds today. It was the first time she had visited in a while.

Amy had been recruited to help prepare for the athletic tournament. As such, she'd become much busier lately, and it had become even more difficult for them to have a proper conversation face-to-face.

They still wrote letters to each other, but deep down, that didn't leave him feeling totally satisfied.

Amy's presence just made everything around her brighter.

Everyone—both the animals and the caretakers—looked happy whenever Amy came to the riding grounds. This effect wasn't because she could use healing magic—it was because of her natural aura and personality.

Even though it was his official duty, the thought of being holed up here because of the civil servants' petty reasons while Marvin, not himself, introduced the foal to her, made him want to complain about the situation.

He normally never vocalized any of his grievances. And even though he hadn't said a word, it was clear from his face that he was upset. Even Darios looked concerned as he guarded him.

"All you have to do is show up for a little bit, and then no one can be offended. Hang in there just a little while longer."

"I'll be fine, I understand. I know I've asked a lot of you, Darios."

"Not at all, Your Highness. The horses are totally prepared."

“Just leave the rest to us, Your Highness,” said Hannah.

Darios and Hannah had decided long ago that Amy was Edward’s fiancée. They could think of nothing they wanted less than the current set-up, with the baron gleefully trying to introduce his own daughter to Edward.

They heard a knock at the door, and Edward took Darios with him down into the courtyard.



THE luncheon itself went fairly smoothly. Edward was able to get a read on most of the attendees and quickly weed out the ones with ulterior motives. The only attendee he really had to watch out for was the head of Wizzle & Co.

Just to be sure, Edward spoke with him for a little bit, drawing out some information. The strategic and mutual probing underneath the veneer of a pleasant back-and-forth was a trifle to Edward. There were only a handful of people he had met in his life, like Alexander and Marvin, with whom he didn’t have to do this dance.

When he was done socializing, Edward tried to move to a less-crowded part of the courtyard at what he had judged to be an opportune moment. But then Baron Burleigh suddenly trapped him in conversation.

“Your Highness, I hope you have been enjoying yourself?”

“It has been a most magnificent party, Baron.”

“Yes, everyone was anxiously awaiting the day of your arrival, rearing to get a glimpse of you. My daughter and myself included, of course.”

Behind the baron’s stout body, a girl around the same age as Amy appeared.

Her braided, chestnut hair was decorated with flowers, and her slim frame was engulfed in a fluffy dress. Her smile looked bashful and could be described as cute, but he imagined—and perhaps it was purely out of reflex—gears turning calculatngly behind her eyes.

Before he knew it, other people joined the group, and Edward ended up surrounded by girls.

At first the ladies seemed startled by Darios, standing behind Edward, but they quickly regained their composure, looked away

from him, and started chattering away at Edward in high-pitched voices.

All the ladies lavished praise and smiles upon him, but he realized that they all looked the same—they even sounded the same.

He vaguely wondered if his impression would change the more time passed, but he knew the answer at once: probably not.

“Your Highness, have you not decided on a fiancée?”

“I heard there was a candidate!”

“That was probably just a rumor. There’s no way his candidate would be someone like that...”

“Yes, that girl...”

Edward remained silent, only smiling politely. Around him, the chirping ladies brought up the subject of his fiancée candidate.

He felt the full force of their egotism as they sneered and looked up at him.

“If I looked like she does, I would feel too ashamed to stand next to you, Your Highness.”

“I heard she cares more about taking care of *animals* than having a social life.”

“She should just leave that stuff to the servants! What kind of a lady is she?”

None of the ladies there knew Amy personally. They must have heard these things from their parents or friends. If they were to actually meet Amy, they would understand her personality. However, Edward wasn’t going to let such absurd rumors and preconceived notions go unchecked.

“You’re standing up for your candidate because you’re so kind, Your Highness. But don’t you think she’s unseemly?”

“That’s right! There are more worthy partners,” said Baron Burleigh’s daughter in a sweet voice, catching Darios off guard and slipping her arm around Edward’s elbow.

The other girls laughed and giggled like she had said something funny.

“Worthy...” Edward finally said. “You’re right about that. I’m always trying to be more worthy of Amy.”

“Pardon me?”

“You asked what kind of a lady she is, didn’t you?”

The ladies clearly never expected him to say that.

The baron’s daughter’s eyes were wide. Edward very smoothly

extracted her hand from him and smiled. His handsome smile utterly lacked any warmth. The ladies gulped nervously.

“The person I want as my partner is a lady that has never spoken ill of anyone. Darios?”

“Sir!”

Not once since he had first met her.

Not even after enrolling in school.

Even after all the jealous comments and vicious accusations, Amy still never said a bad word about anyone.

Edward had never heard her do so, at least.

She would talk animatedly with Rosalind and her other friends about her day.

Her eyes sparkled during exciting times. Her eyebrows furrowed during troubled times.

She was the most passionate when she talked about Tigger or other animals, but even then, Edward never felt jealous—only genuinely envious.

Just sitting beside Amy excitedly chattering away made him feel totally whole.

Amy was the only one who stood out to him from the very beginning—she was extraordinary, entirely unique.

He left the ladies, taken aback and shell-shocked, and walked away with Darios.

“Let’s go back to the palace.”

“At once, Your Highness.”

If Ventus took the journey at a run, Edward might still be able to make it in time.

Edward quickened his pace, working out the shortest route to get back home in his head.

Chapter 6: The Tournament

“WH-WHAT...what on earth did I do?!”

Amy dove onto her bed as soon as she reached her room, but it wasn't enough to just bury her face in a pillow—she curled up in abject horror, covering her entire head with the pillow like it was a hard helmet.

Edward had ridden with her in the carriage that took her home from the royal riding grounds.

That much was all well and good...

It wasn't unusual for them to be alone together in a carriage or sit beside each other instead of on opposite sides. Even Edward taking Amy's hand wasn't strange—he often did so when they greeted each other or when he was escorting her somewhere.

The unbelievable part was Amy's own behavior!

Taking Edward's hand from resting on his lap and bringing it up to her own cheek wasn't something Amy had planned beforehand. She hadn't even thought of the words she had said.

It was like her body had moved of its own accord, and the words just tumbled out of her mouth. Like that was a totally natural thing for her to do.

This can't be real! There was no need for me to put his hand against my face like that, at least!

But, out of character though it was, it was difficult for Amy to believe that her actions had been manipulated by the “invisible hand of the game.” Amy had been aware of everything the whole time, and her recollection and judgment did not feel altered.

She was simply embarrassed by her own unbelievable actions.

Even if he might have felt better by touching her, as she had reasoned before, wouldn't it have been enough for him to keep holding her hand?

Amy had eventually come to her senses and awkwardly took Edward's hand off her cheek. He had started to say something to her, but just then, with impeccable (or terrible) timing, the carriage pulled up to the Northland estate. Amy hastily blurted out a

goodbye and flew out the carriage door.

She was trying to maintain some semblance of composure, but the scene kept playing over and over again in her mind of its own accord.

Every time it replayed, Amy could almost feel the warmth and texture of Edward's hand, smell the strange cotton-candy scent sweetening the air inside the carriage, witness the scene coming to life in vivid realism... Composure was far beyond her control.

As Amy squirmed in agony and wrestled with her blankets and sheets, she felt a familiar weight plop down on her. When she peeked through a gap in the feather pillows piled on top of her, she saw a round, golden eye looking back.

"Tigger..."

When Amy came home, Tigger had excitedly run up to greet her, but he froze in his tracks at the sheer speed at which she came running inside. Although he had fallen behind on the journey up to her room, Tigger was now on the bed, watching her, head tilted.

With tears in her eyes, Amy slowly extracted herself from the mound of pillows and held out her arms. Tigger naturally took his place in between them.

He meowed loudly in her arms, and Amy exhaled a long sigh of relief.

"How am I supposed to act when I see him next?" Amy bemoaned, burrowing her red face in Tigger's fluffy, long fur. She could hear him purring in reply.

With Tigger, I'm perfectly fine being so close I feel his heartbeat.

Amy could always tell Tigger's mood right away just from the swishing of his tail—whether he was excited, happy, relaxed... Edward's face from that moment popped back into her mind.

She had never seen him look that surprised before.

Surprised as he had been, his happiness seemed to outweigh his shock.

I'm glad it didn't make him feel uncomfortable, but... Ugh, this can't be good! I mean, only l-lovers do that kind of stuff! Oh gosh! What have I done?!

Amy's embarrassment was reaching a boiling point. She clung to Tigger again, desperately trying to rein her thoughts in.

Who said anything about lovers?!

Amy was a fiancée *candidate*. If she wasn't even his fiancée, she was certainly not his lover, either. She calmed down just a little

bit when she realized this, but it also made her heart feel equally as heavy.

Amy went back to hugging Tigger in an attempt to brush aside the strange feelings, but the pressure made her remember the pendant necklace hanging over her chest. She took it out from under her dress and held it. It was warm from resting against her skin.

“Tigger...what should I do?”

The night wore on as Amy gazed at the pendant in the palm of her hand, glittering as it reflected the warm lights of her room.



HOW should I act around Edward now?!

Amy had spent many hours worrying about this, but her concern ended up being unnecessary. They both got so busy after that day, there was no spare moment for them to meet.

As they ostensibly continued sending letters back and forth like normal, Amy's agitation eventually settled down, and her memory of that time in the carriage started to feel more like a dream.

Ed surely must have forgotten about it...right? Yeah, it'll be fine! I have to focus my efforts elsewhere today, anyway! Amy tried to convince herself as she refocused her priorities.

The athletic tournament was starting today.

This time around, she wouldn't be there as a spectator—she was participating as a healing magician on the medical staff. Amy had requested and been scheduled for full-time shifts while the tournament was being held.

As she ate breakfast with her family, Harold, who was supposed to participate in the tournament the next day, came up in conversation.

“What?” Amy asked her father in disbelief. “Have Harold and the others really not arrived yet?”

“That's right. We received word from the guild last night that Harold's party would be arriving in the royal capital late tonight at the earliest.”

Harold and his party had been hunting along the way as they journeyed toward the Kingdom of Luducia, but it was taking longer

to get here than they had planned.

“They’re so late because they got word of a rare magical beast appearing on the other side of the kingdom they were traveling through, so they made a pit-stop,” Joshua continued.

“I can’t say I’d expect anything less from Hal,” said Isabelle. “But they defeated it, so they should make it back in time for their match tomorrow, right?”

“I guess it’s a good thing Harold didn’t have any matches scheduled for today,” said Amy.

The tournament took place over three days. The qualifying matches were completed a few days prior, and today they were holding the individual matches for the finalists.

The team competition was scheduled for tomorrow, and on the last day was an exhibition of sword dances and artistic magical techniques.

The tournament was only held once every three years, so there were always a great number of participants willing to risk it all and throw down the gauntlet. Amy, who had been helping with preparations as Sir Dion’s assistant, had seen many such participants. When she thought about them, she got a little worried about her brother’s lackadaisical attitude.

Amy still felt ill at ease about the situation.

“But forget about that,” said Isabelle, pointing to the plate in front of Amy. “Don’t worry about your brother. You’ve got to focus on more important business today. Here, eat a little more. You’ll be healing a lot of people today, won’t you?”

Using magic drained the reserves from one’s body. Amy’s stomach may have been full, but if she didn’t eat a little more, she’d definitely run out of magic before the day’s end. If that happened, not only would she not be able to perform healing magic, but if she were to collapse, she’d just be adding more work for Sir Dion and the others.

“I am eating!” Amy protested. “D-Dad, you don’t have to do that!”

There was no need for Joshua to silently pass Amy his own dessert!

“Are you sure? Didn’t you say more people would get injured today than yesterday?”

“I did, but it really is fine. I’ve got some cott nut snacks, so I don’t need anyone else’s food.”

As Amy munched on her food, she considered the day ahead.

The matches in the tournament would look like real fights, but there were strict rules in place. Some attacks were banned, and the weapons they used had to have blunted blades to avoid any fatal accidents.

But even in normal sports, injuries were a frequent enough occurrence. And with the participants competing for high stakes with such intensity, unforeseen accidents were almost guaranteed.

As a member of the medical staff, Amy had been stationed in the first-aid room during the qualifying rounds, and she had been incredibly busy with the constant stream of injured people.

There would be fewer people competing during the final stages than at the preliminaries. However, they would be competing at a considerably higher level, and whether they used swords or magic, the blows would be much harder.

With the looming possibility of more severe injuries, Amy and the other healing magicians had to take all possible precautions.

"I really hope no one will get injured at the tournament..."

"That's quite a big ask, don't you think? But you're not the only one stationed in the first-aid room, are you, Amy?"

"No, Sir Dion's always there, and everyone else is on rotation. Oh! That reminds me...Finn will be there starting today."

"Finn... Oh! That's Sir Dion's apprentice, right?" asked Joshua.

"He's more of a successor than an apprentice, right, Amy?" Isabelle added.

Amy nodded at her parents, gulping down the thick slice of bacon she had been chewing.

Finneas Hamilton was Sir Dion's top pupil. He was also, perhaps unsurprisingly, one of the love interest characters from Amy's otome game.

Out of all the love interests, Amy had figured out the prince, the hidden character, the aristocrat, and the foreign prince—the only two remaining mysteries had been the magician and the knight.

Amy kept going back and forth on the subject, first thinking, "*At this point, we're bound to run into each other, so I might as well get it over with...*", and then thinking, "*No way, I'd rather avoid it altogether!*"

But in the end, Amy couldn't stop the meeting from happening.

In the opening screen of her game, the magician had been the only character who had a hood drawn over his head, obscuring half of his face. She could remember that he wore a monocle, had violet eyes, and had long, braided, platinum-blond hair.

Although she couldn't be sure if Finn had the same facial features, it was quite rare for someone to match those three characteristics exactly.

There he is! Amy had screamed internally when she first saw him. *His looks are so striking and distinctive, he has to be one of the characters!*

It had been quite some time since Amy had started learning magic from Sir Dion. She'd heard that Sir Dion had an apprentice, but she never actually met him before. This was both because Sir Dion never brought him over to the Northland estate for lessons because Amy was a minor, and because roughly one year ago, Finneas had left Luducia to do magic training abroad.

His return home had coincided with the start of the tournament, but his temporary absence during tournament duty had been the reason Amy had started helping out with the first-aid room at all, so they had only met in person very recently.

He didn't seem to be a particularly skilled conversationalist, only exchanging greetings and speaking as little as possible.

His instructions, however, were very precise, and he was incredibly accurate in both his work and his magic. He reminded Amy of the club presidents of the after-school clubs who looked out for her in her previous life, so she ended up jokingly calling him "boss" the same way she used to call them.

But Sir Dion's students actually did end up having a sort of sibling-like mentor-mentee relationship, so the nickname "boss" wasn't going *totally* off the mark.

Finn didn't exactly object to it, either. Whenever she'd call him that, he'd just give her a pat on the head. He surprisingly seemed to have taken a liking to her.

There was a reason why Amy wasn't extremely wary toward him, even though he was probably one of the love interests.

The fact that he's connected to Sir Dion is rather comforting, but also...

"I just can't believe that he's the father of a young child, with that youthful face!" Isabelle exclaimed.

"I'm sure Finn would insist that you're calling the kettle

black,” said Amy.

But Isabelle wasn't wrong. Although Finneas looked like he was the same age as Edward, he was actually three years older than Harold and married to boot.

Two years ago, he'd married his childhood friend, and they had recently had a child together when they went abroad for his training.

Even though he was very likely one of the love interests, Amy couldn't imagine that Finneas, a sincerely devoted husband and famous magician in some parts of the world, would get tangled up with either the heroine of the story or the villainess.

“Amy, isn't it about time you head out?” asked Joshua.

Amy jumped.

“Oh no!”

“Hold on! Finish your tea first!” cried Isabelle.

Amy quickly finished the rest of her breakfast in preparation for a full day of performing healing magic.



THE tournament venue was located a short distance away from the heart of the royal capital.

Amy thought it vaguely resembled the Colosseum, which she'd only seen in pictures during her previous life, but the only real similarities were the facility's oval shape and its slanted outer walls.

Unlike the Colosseum, however, it wasn't surrounded by tiered platforms for audience seating. Inside the stone walls, it was more like a public square with a stage, almost like a venue for an outdoor music festival.

Amy had unfortunately never been to the Colosseum or an outdoor music festival, so she based her comparisons purely off her memories of things she'd studied or seen on TV.

The stadium was normally used for military and patrol training, but it was also used as an open-air theater for public performances and for the large-scale marketplace held several times a month.

The triennial tournament, however, was by far the biggest official event held here. Starting from the individual matches on the first day, the venue was packed with huge crowds of spectators

throughout the entire tournament.

Inside the venue, there was one multi-storied building beside the stage for viewing. The highest floor was reserved for the king and the other members of the royal family, and the lower floors were reserved for high-ranking aristocrats.

Three years ago, Amy had watched Harold's matches not from that building, of course, but from a section of the ground-level general seating in front of the stage partitioned off for lower-ranking aristocrats.

Behind the stage where participants fought, several one-storied, roofed buildings were connected to each other by a maze of corridors.

It was in that maze of buildings where the first-aid room and the participants' waiting rooms were set up, and it was there where Amy busily worked behind the scenes.



THE individual matches on the first day of the tournament did not disappoint in terms of excitement.

A young commoner who had just come from the countryside bested a knight who had been a top contender to win the entire tournament.

Although the commoner unfortunately lost in the semifinals, the audience went wild over the underdog's incredible efforts—although the medical staff couldn't see the stadium from where they worked, they could hear the booming cheers even from the first-aid station.

Regardless of whether the participants won or lost, all of them—including the spectacular commoner—visited the first-aid station after their matches. Amy's wish that morning that no one would get injured had been made in vain—every single participant ended up needing healing.

After performing healing magic with Sir Dion nonstop since arriving that morning, Amy was utterly exhausted by the end of the day. As soon as she got home, she gave Tigger a big hug, dove into her bed, and the first day of the athletic tournament came to a close.



THE next day, Amy awoke after sleeping very soundly, ate plenty of food for breakfast, and arrived at the stadium fully revitalized. She hustled around the first-aid room, preparing the bandages and waiting for the tournament to begin, when suddenly she heard Finneas's voice.

"Amy? Don't you want to go see His Highness or your family?"

"But..."

"There's still some time before the tournament begins. They're probably either in their waiting rooms or out in the practice field right now. Why don't you go say hello, at least?"

If they gave advanced notice, family and friends could enter a participant's waiting room whenever they wanted. Additionally, there was an old superstition that a lover or spouse's encouragement would ensure a participant's victory, and those visits were welcomed as a sign of good luck.

As Amy was just a fiancée candidate and not really Edward's spouse or lover, she didn't think there would be any real benefit for him if she visited. However, once the tournament started, she would have her hands full with work the whole day, so now was her only chance to go see him.

And Harold, having finally returned to the royal capital late last night, had slept at the guild lodge and hadn't visited home yet. Amy had come to the first-aid station earlier than the participants, so she hadn't seen him yet, either.

I-It'll probably be fine, seeing Ed... It'll be fine. I mean, Ed wouldn't care! Plus, Alec will be there, too!

At that moment, the memory of the carriage ride flashed across Amy's mind again, but she forced herself to relax. She was just going to support him as a friend. Everything would be fine... probably.

Amy glanced over at Sir Dion, and he nodded at her to go.

"Don't be longer than half an hour. And bring a guard with you."

"O-Okay... I'll just go for a little bit, then. Scott, could you come with me?"

"Of course, Lady Amy."

An escort knight was stationed in the first-aid room as a security measure. There were apparently incidents in the past where

losers would retaliate by attacking the healing magicians or breaking instruments in fits of rage.

Although she could definitely imagine Sir Dion turning the tables on any would-be attacker in Scott's absence, Amy and the other healing magicians were basically useless at offensive magic.

Today's guard at the first-aid station, Scott, was the same guard who looked after her at the royal riding grounds before. Because it wasn't their first time together, Amy wasn't particularly nervous around him.

I'm saved! Amy thought, her shoes making clacking sounds as she followed Scott down a narrow, dimly lit corridor.

Amy realized they must be getting close to the other members of the royal family, too. Knights of the Royal Guard were standing at attention with tense expressions, and staff members were rushing past Amy and Scott.

Amy didn't leave the first-aid station at all yesterday, so she had no idea the corridors were this heavily guarded. Resisting the urge to fidget, she tried to quiet her breathing and plowed on.

Amy turned a few corners, crossed another corridor, and finally made it to the participants' waiting rooms. The atmosphere suddenly became much more relaxed.

It was just as noisy as before, but excitement hung in the air instead of tension. The whole place buzzed with energy. With more windows and doors, there was more sunlight streaming into the corridors. Amy's cat-like gold eyes softened in relief at the brightness.

"Boy," Amy said, sighing, "that was stressful! I would totally have gotten lost on my own."

Scott smiled, remembering his days as a rookie. "The corridor paths are pretty complicated. They all look the same if you're not used to them. I had a hard time when I first started, too."

Scott secretly thought to himself that Amy's face was an open book.

There was a softness about her, which might have been partly due to her chubby frame, but she also never made the people around her feel small or insignificant, unlike many other aristocrats.

It sometimes made him waver in his vigilance as a guard, but he also realized that having the innate ability to put everyone around you at ease was probably a rare personality to have.

"Was it hard to memorize the corridors?" she asked.

"I couldn't really do my job without memorizing them, but... yes, it was hard. I got lost many times."

Amy giggled. "It's okay! I won't tell anyone!"

As he watched Amy put her index finger against her lips and promise to keep his secret, Scott suddenly felt a kinship with her, like she was his little sister.

When Amy became an adult, she would probably become a "normal" aristocratic woman, one who perfectly divorced her "true" self from her "socially acceptable" self...and he genuinely felt very sad about that.

"It's just a little further now," he said.

"Okay. Thank you."

The participants were either waiting in their waiting rooms or practicing out in the attached practice field, while some were doing their own warm-ups in a large, open building.

People were gathered from all over the world in the unfamiliar building, and snippets of conversations in foreign languages zipped past Amy's ear.

It's like I've stepped into a foreign country!

Luducia had always had relations with foreign countries, but right now, Amy felt like a tourist visiting a foreign bazaar. She made her way through the building and arrived at another relatively quiet building that had a few rooms.

"Lady Amy, this is Prince Edward's waiting room."

Amy nodded at Scott, who turned around and announced their arrival.

There was a waiting room for each participating group. Amy wasn't sure how they were arranged, so when she asked for "whichever one is closest first," she supposed this meant Edward's room was closer than Harold's.

She had heard that the matches were to be conducted fairly and without any preferential accommodations for social status, so Edward's waiting room was to be exactly the same as the other rooms.

But with the Prince of Luducia and the son of the Duke of Coverdale inside this waiting room, there was naturally a guard standing outside.

Amy smiled up at him.

"Hello, Darios!"

"Hello, Lady Amy," said Darios, returning her smile. "His

Highness just got here too. Come in.”

They had arrived just in time.

Darios knocked loudly on the thick wooden doors. The doors were opened, but they were immediately faced with a partitioning screen placed to conceal the immediate interior of the room.

The old butler from the Coverdale estate, affectionately referred to as “Gramps”, was standing in front of the screen, smiling and looking totally unsurprised that Amy had come.

“Gramps! It’s been too long!”

“It has indeed. It’s wonderful to see you looking so well, Lady Amy.”

“What? Amy?”

Alexander’s head popped out from behind the screen.

“Young master...” the butler chided gently.

He sounded as if he’d been waiting for someone else, but she could only think of one likely candidate...

“Could Rosalind not come today?” he asked, confirming her suspicion.

“No, she was supposed to come with Letizia, but— Oh, that’s right... They’re probably being held up by Jahal. Well, she’ll probably stop by before long.”

Alexander had replied in his usual manner, making it seem like he didn’t really care one way or the other. Amy had wondered if he’d get nervous before his match, but it didn’t look like he was nervous at all.

Amy got terribly uncomfortable doing anything in front of people, both in this life and her last, so she was envious of Alec’s courage.

There had been no other waiting rooms along their path with guards stationed outside them, so Amy assumed Jahal’s waiting room was in a different section.

The foreign prince had given participating in this tournament as a reason—or perhaps a pretense—for his study abroad trip. He had apparently invited an adventurer and a swordsman from his hometown to be his team members.

From the tournament seeding, it seemed like Jahal’s team would have to win quite a few matches before they would have the chance to go up against Edward’s team, but with two princes participating, both groups were getting a lot of attention from the spectators.

"You haven't seen her around?" Alec asked Amy.

"No. I haven't had time to see Rosalind or Letty lately."

"Because you've been so hard at work, right?" came another voice.

"E-Ed!"

Amy's surprise at Ed's entrance was much more exaggerated than the situation required.

Getting so worked up over someone who was supposed to be here anyway... Something must be wrong with me!

"I'm really glad you came!" Ed said, taking her hand without a second thought. "Come this way."

"O-Okay... Thanks..."

He led her inside the room, past the partitioning screen.

The room was furnished with a simple sofa and a low table. There were also racks for weapons and armor. It was bigger than she had anticipated.

"You must have been so busy yesterday. Are you feeling all right?"

"I-I'm fine! I feel great!"

Edward's clothes were very casual—only a shirt and pants. *He must wear this before he puts his armor on*, Amy realized. A few of the buttons below his collar were undone.

Alexander was wearing similar clothing, but Amy supposed the difference between how they usually dressed was starker with Edward. She was so unused to seeing him like this, she started to feel panicked and flustered.

"Are you sure? You don't look pale or anything, but..."

Too close, too close, TOO CLOSE!

Edward had leaned in to get a better look at her face. Amy froze at the absurdly close proximity. To make matters worse, Edward put his other hand against her cheek, just like *that time!*

Unlike the evening carriage ride, it was perfectly bright inside his waiting room. Drawing closer and closer, Edward's gray eyes looked completely silver. Amy's lungs felt paralyzed, and her face immediately went scarlet.

Noticing this, Edward's thoughts seemed to go down a different track.

"You're red..." he said. "So you do have a fever, after all."

Amy's mouth flew open, but she was too flustered to form any coherent words.

“Ed,” Alec chided. “Did you do that on purpose?”

“Do what?”

“Can you really be that obtuse?” Alec asked, shrugging his shoulders and looking amused.

Amy tried to communicate a request for help with her eyes, but the tears threatening to spill over probably made it hard for him to understand.

“Anyway,” Alec continued, indifferently changing the subject, “this will be the first time Amy meets Kevin, right?”

“O-Oh, yes!” said Amy.

She had only heard his name before.

He was the grandson of the famous General Riley and Edward and Alexander’s mentor in swordsmanship. The three of them would be going out as a team in their group match today.

Although Amy had visited the palace frequently, she almost always went straight to the riding grounds, so she had actually only met a few people who worked at the palace. Her acquaintances with military personnel were limited to some of the guard knights that escorted her.

Alexander’s question seemed to have jogged Edward’s memory.

“You’re right! I’ll introduce you two. Kevin...”

“Good grief! Here I thought you guys had totally forgotten about me.”

The voice, which sounded slightly offended but playful, came from high above her short frame.

Edward finally removed his hand from her cheek and gestured out into the room. Amy’s eyes followed his hand and landed on a very tall man.

He looked to be the same age as Harold. He had short, dark chestnut hair and hazel, almond-shaped eyes. He looked quite strong but not very hot-blooded. He looked more like a military officer or something...

Wait, is this the “Knight”?! What a time to have finally unlocked all the characters!

He looked almost exactly like the character she remembered from that game... If he had armor and a helmet on, they would be identical.

Amy knew his grandfather, General Riley. Their hair and eye colors were the same, but Kevin gave off quite a different

impression than the magnanimous general. If the general had resembled his grandson more, Amy might have seen this coming.

"It's an honor to meet you, Lady Amy Northland. My name is Kevin Riley."

"I-It's nice to meet you."

As Amy's mind was scrambling, coming to grips with this new information, Kevin clicked his heels together and gave her a military salute.

"I'm glad you're here. Prince Edward has been waiting for you most eagerly."

"What?"

"It may just be superstition, but I think Edward was quite worried about it."

"Kevin!" Edward protested.

"What?" Amy asked again involuntarily.

Kevin smiled mischievously as he tried to pacify Edward's objections. That was the exact smile of the knight from the opening screen of her otome game.

But that wasn't what had caught Amy's attention.

Does that mean Ed was waiting for me? For the lover's encouragement?

Assuming she had misunderstood, she looked up at Edward for an explanation, but all she saw were his ears blushing furiously.

Amy opened her mouth, hoping she could explain away her wandering gaze. But she had no idea what on earth to say. Her entire head felt hot. She could only see one course of action—running away.

"U-Um, actually, I... I have to go see Harold... S-Scott!" she called out abruptly.

"Yes, milady," Scott replied, sounding amused. "Shall we go?"

At this abrupt turn of events, Edward's eyes widened in panic.

"Amy?"

"Um... I wish..."

"Amy, wait!"

"I wish you luck!"

Amy wasn't even sure if she had finished saying the standard well-wishing phrase before she had turned on her heel. Just as she started to run, someone grabbed her hand from behind.

Amy stopped with a surprised jump, and Edward stepped out in front of her. His hand was very warm.

“Ed...”

“I know you’ll probably be busy when the matches start, but if you can, I was hoping you could get away from the first-aid room for a little bit to watch my match.”

“Y-Yes. I want to cheer for you.”

“I’m glad.”

Standing so close together, Amy couldn’t see anyone else—her entire field of vision was filled with Edward.

I wonder if that’s why I feel a little more at ease...

The words she couldn’t properly say before now spilled from her lips easily.

“I wish you the best of luck. Please try not to get hurt.”

“I will. Thank you. I’ll try to make you worry as little as possible. But you *will* heal me, won’t you, Amy?”

“Yes, I’ll heal you, but...”

Of course I’ll heal you. But I don’t want you to get hurt in the first place!

She had told him as much sometime before, when they had all had that lunch together in the lounge, but now she wanted him to get hurt even less—she didn’t want him to even get the tiniest scratch.

She’d rather him lose, uninjured, than win with a serious injury.

How selfish of me! I must be a terrible person!

Amy’s selfish wish totally ignored Edward’s hard work—all the training he had done in preparation for this...

After the shock of discovering these feelings of hers, she suddenly felt depressed and disappointed in herself. She felt the color drain from her face in shame.

Edward looked at her, frowning with concern again.

“Amy, you really are sick, aren’t you?”

“I-I’m not, really.”

Today, he would be competing not only in front of the king but also the queen and the Crown Prince. Edward would show everything he had accomplished in his training in front of his family, maybe even for the first time.

Even before such an important match for him, Edward was worrying about another person—Amy. He noticed everything about her.

Amy felt guilt-ridden and sad, but also...happy. Her chest

tightened painfully, so much so that she understood what her heart was trying to tell her.

What should I do...? I'm scared...

Amy was frightened of acknowledging her own feelings.

She had met all the love interests from her game and had come to realize that things in this world weren't exactly the same as they were in the world of her otome game. And yet, perhaps the fact that she couldn't take that last step was proof that Amy was still enslaved by the game...

She felt like she was going around in circles, being consumed by a whirlpool of unanswered thoughts.

Like she was being pulled into the depths of a dark ocean at night...

Then suddenly, she was pulled back from her reverie by the feeling of someone taking her hand. She wondered hazily what it was, blankly watching Edward's movements, when he raised her hand. Amy felt something soft against her fingers.

It took a few beats before she realized what her fingers had touched.

H-His...LIPS?!



A fire broke out across her face.

Her face was so hot, Amy genuinely believed it had caught on fire. Her entire body froze in shock, but her panic and confusion sent her mind into hyper-drive.

Gently pulling his lips away from her hand, Edward looked up and smiled cheerfully after confirming that color had returned to her face.

“I’ll do my best,” he assured her.

“G-Good...l-luck...”

I’m in trouble. My heart’s about to give out!

Amy didn’t know what to do, and she couldn’t even begin to form a thought—her mind was totally blank.

Alexander and Kevin looked on sympathetically as Amy left their waiting room on unsteady legs.

Chapter 7: An Absence and an Encounter

AMY had no idea where her feet were taking her, but before she knew it, she and Scott had already arrived at her brother's waiting room.

More and more people had trickled into the waiting rooms to offer friends and family members words of encouragement, making the atmosphere even livelier than it had been before. But Amy didn't see Harold anywhere in his waiting room.

"He's not here?" Amy asked, slightly disappointed.

"Sorry, Amy. Hal's out in the practice field," explained Hal's friend and party member Gilbert. His twin brother Nicholas stood right beside him.

"He's just the type of guy that always needs to be moving around, you know? He told us he was getting bored during standby time."

"Oh, dear... I should be the one apologizing for my brother, then."

"Oh, no! There's nothing you need to apologize for, Amy."

Gilbert and Nicholas took turns thanking her for going out of her way to visit.

Visiting Harold might have been a fool's errand, but Amy thought those two, always getting caught up in Harold's whims, got the shorter end of the stick. Visitors were not allowed to enter the practice field. There wasn't much she could do about seeing him if he wasn't here in the first place.

However, she was worried about Harold's tendency to lose track of time when he concentrated on something. This quirk of his had angered their mother many times in the past, both in this life and the last.

"I wonder if he'll make it back in time for his match..." Amy wondered.

"He's not training on his own, so he should be fine," Gilbert assured her.

"That's right! He's got his chaperone with him," said Nicholas.

The twins smiled with knowing looks, and Amy suddenly remembered that Harold wasn't the only one missing from the waiting room—the party's new addition was, too.

"Is the new party member with Harold?" asked Amy.

"Yep! She's been helping him practice a new technique."

"She keeps an eye on him to keep him from doing anything too crazy, and unlike Hal, she actually knows how to keep track of time. We can rest easy."

"Oh gosh!" said Amy, putting a hand over her forehead. "That makes me feel kind of guilty..."

The adventurer who was supposed to join their party as a dual support-healer specialist was being forced to be Harold's babysitter?!

"No, no, it's fine! Yasmine enjoys it, too!"

"He's right. They really make a good duo!"

"The new party member's name is actually Yasmine?" Amy asked.

In Harold's most recent letter—which had just been a map with some scribbled notes on it—he had written that he found "Yasumi."

Amy thought that Harold had meant that he found someone who roughly matched the skill level of Yasumi, the name of the person he used to play with in his last life. But what on earth were the chances that person's name was Yasmine?

Amy had never heard the name Yasmine before in Luducia, so she must have come from a foreign kingdom. But just as she had this thought, Gilbert and Nicholas shook their heads.

"Yasmine is just a nickname. Her real name is something else."

"We don't really know the whole story, but Hal started calling her that right when he met her, and Yasmine said it was fine."

"What? Really?"

So he had given her that name because she was a support character, just like Yasumi in his past life, and Yasmine told him it was fine? Amy hung her head in shame, telepathically apologizing to Yasmine once more for her brother.

"We met her around the border of Dubhe...or was it by Salaiza?"

Both Dubhe and Salaiza were famous for being home to many magical beasts. Predictably, both locations attracted adventurers.

They explained that Yasmine had been hunting magical beasts

there, but she wasn't a permanent member of any party despite her amazing skill. She had been registered with the guild as a freelancer and was traveling with a party that had hired her when she encountered Harold's party, who had come to the area to hunt.

"She was amazing, so we were sure she must've belonged to another party. But she didn't."

"Yeah. She'd gotten many offers for permanent positions, though."

They explained that it had been around a year since Yasmine had become renowned as an extraordinarily talented temporary support party member. She never agreed to join a party on a permanent basis, even when offered exceptional terms, and had always remained temporary hired help.

Then Harold, totally enthralled by her skill, told them with sparkling eyes, "We've got to get her on our team!" and immediately started taking steps to do just that.

The twins gleefully explained to Amy that the guild members were shocked when they heard Yasmine had decided to join them as a regular party member—it even caused a bit of an uproar in the local area.

"I'm glad such an amazing person joined your party, but...why did she? She rejected everyone else, right?"

"Yes, well..." said Nicholas, looking far into the distance as if he had achieved enlightenment. "She just got caught up in Hal's energy and inadvertently agreed."

"That's right!" said Gilbert, smiling and giving Amy a thumb's up, clearly pleased with the end result.

"Hal..." Amy groaned.

Did he slide onto the floor and bow, prostrating himself and bombarding her with pleas? Or did he come right out and passionately tell her, "I won't give up until you join my party!" The reality had probably been a little of both...

Either way, he's so embarrassing...

Amy rubbed a finger between her eyebrows, where a wrinkle was trying to form, and grumbled for the umpteenth time, "I'm so sorry about my brother..."



THE thirty minutes of free time Sir Dion had given her was almost up. Amy left a good-luck message for her brother and left his waiting room.

Scott led the way, and they hurried back to the building with the first-aid room. The area was just as heavily guarded as when they had left. Just as they were about to turn their second corner, a knight guard stood in their way, stopping them.

“His Majesty will be passing through here shortly. Please wait there,” he announced.

“I’m very sorry, Lady Amy, but we’ll have to wait here for a moment,” Scott said.

“That’s all right, I understand.”

Fortunately or unfortunately, their timing had coincided with the arrival of His Majesty the King. They took a step back to make way, as they were instructed. Just then, all the commotion in the corridor completely vanished. Amy could feel threads of tension stretch tightly across her skin.

All the guard knights, including Scott, stood at attention, and even Amy tried to keep her back perfectly straight as she bent forward in a slight bow. You were supposed to kneel when you were officially in the presence of the king, but in such a narrow corridor, obstructing the path would just be a nuisance.

The posture Amy took seemed to satisfy both Scott and the civil official leading the king’s party, and she wasn’t rebuked.

At long last, Amy heard the sounds of footsteps and clothes rustling in the deathly silent corridor. A civil official led the way, followed by the king’s exclusive guard knight. A long line followed behind him, which included the king, the queen, and their attending servants and maids.

Amy kept her head down and could only see their feet as they passed by her, but she was surprised to find she could guess who was passing by just by their shoes and the hem of their clothes.

Whoa, the king’s attending servant’s shoes are so shiny—there’s not a spot on them! The navy-blue taffeta skirt must be a maid... Whoa! This one must be Her Majesty! Huh...?

Amy had been trying to distract herself while keeping her breathing as quiet as possible. But just then, shoes decorated with jewels came to a stop right in front of her.

The leather shoes looked soft and came to a slender point at the toes. They turned right toward Amy and were suddenly hidden

by the swishing hem of a dress.

The queen was standing right in front of her.

“You—lift your head.”

M-Me?!

The beautiful voice had been loud and clear, but at the same time, it was a voice that could not be denied.

As a cold sweat broke out over her back, Amy timidly raised her head.

And there stood the queen.

The eyes behind her nonchalantly opened folding fan were zeroed in on Amy.

Wh-What?! What did I do?! Was I supposed to have knelt after all?! Is she going to call me an insolent trollop or—huh?

She never imagined she would ever be addressed by the queen.

Sensing that the king had turned back and was looking at her too, Amy felt even more blood drain from her face. She had no idea if the queen sensed her inner panic, but the queen’s eyes smiled a fraction.

“I’d heard there was a girl studying under Sir Dion as a healing magician. That would be you, yes?”

Is it okay to answer her directly?

When she glanced nervously to her side, she saw Scott was anxiously signaling at her with his eyes, so she steeled her mind and steadied her breath.

“Yes. My name is Amy Northland.”

Amy’s voice miraculously did not tremble.

“I see.”

The queen passed her fan over to the maid standing beside her and suddenly started to take off her gloves.

What?

Then, the queen took a ring off her finger...and then handed it to Amy.

W-What?!

Lady Amy! Reach out your hand and take it! Scott screamed internally.

Amy had frozen in place, but after being stealthily nudged several times by a panicking Scott, she finally reached out her hand.

The queen gently placed the gold ring in Amy’s plump hand.

“It’s quite difficult for someone your age to perform healing magic. I’ve heard you’re quite talented too. Keep up the good

work.”

“Thank you very much for your kind words.”

The queen stooped down to Amy’s eye level and quietly added, “We’ll be counting on your help again today.”

“I’ll work as hard as I can!”

“Splendid.”

Amy thought the queen’s short reply was tinged with relief.

The queen quickly turned back and continued walking, the rest of the party following suit, as if nothing had happened.

Amy clutched the ring against her chest with both hands and bowed once more. When the last servant finally disappeared from view, everyone collectively relaxed.

“T-Talk about surprising...!”

“Lady Amy!”

Amy had weakly slumped down to the floor right where she had been standing. She looked up at Scott, tears nearly spilling from her eyes.

“Her Majesty’s maid looked quite shocked, too, so it didn’t seem like something she had planned in advance... Can you stand? The Crown Prince should be coming through any moment.”

“I’ll stand! Let’s get back—and quickly!”

That was more than enough random encounters for one day!

After forcing her spineless back to stand through gumption alone, Amy jogged out of the corridor.

Edward himself had told Amy before that he wasn’t very close with his parents—they pretty much only saw each other on official occasions.

Even the selection of Edward’s potential fiancée had been spearheaded by the civil officials. Naturally, as just a fiancée candidate, Amy had never had an audience with Edward’s parents.

But warmth from the queen—from Edward’s mother—still lingered in the ring Amy clutched in her hand.

Her eyes were the same color as Edward’s... Amy belatedly realized, feeling the tiny weight in her hand very acutely.



WHEN Amy returned to the first-aid room, Sir Dion wasn’t there. He had been called away to the tournament headquarters. With the

nursing assistants also out on break, the only one there was Finneas.

“Boss, do you have a second?”

“Sure.”

Amy probably didn’t have much time before everyone else returned.

Finneas wasn’t overly fond of idle chit-chat, but Amy knew he would respond if she initiated a conversation and that he knew much more about the affairs of the royal palace than she did.

When Amy told him everything about what had just happened, including the fact she had been given a ring from the queen, his expression remained unchanged.

“That’s not particularly unusual,” he said.

“It’s not?” asked Amy.

“No. When the kingdom officially recognizes you as a healing magician, you’re given some sort of proof.”

Amy tilted her head. She had never heard of this before.

“It’s probably the same as this. Here, look,” said Finneas, rolling up the sleeve of his robe and showing her his bracelet.

A magic stone and a jewel decorated either side of the bangle, but Finneas was pointing to the center, where there was an engraving of the royal family crest.

“Is there a crest like this on your ring?”

“A crest?”

Amy took a closer look at the ring she had been squeezing in her palm. On the spot where a stone would normally go, there was a crest! It was like a signet ring. The design of the crest looked a little different than the one on Finneas’s bracelet, probably because of the constraints of a smaller surface area.

Both designs, however, clearly had a crown, which was a crest element that could only be used by the royal family.

“This crest is also a special identifier. If you have something with this on it, you can freely visit places like the Grand Bookshelf and Greenhouse One. It’s pretty useful.”

“Really? That’s amazing!”

The Grand Bookshelf had the most extensive collection of books in all of Luducia, but the ability to borrow the books or even to enter the building was strictly controlled. Even scholars had to apply in advance to be able to use it.

“I’ve heard there are tons of books on animals at the Grand Bookshelf!”

“Animals? Really?”

The Grand Bookshelf stocked a plethora of books that were highly sought-after by researchers, like ancient spell books and books on history, but Amy’s interests were drawn, as ever, toward animals.

Greenhouse One was relatively easier for people to get access to, but because there were some peculiar medicinal herbs grown there, it wasn’t open to the public.

Being able to enter those two places whenever you wanted was a pretty good perk. That’s how well-treated recognized healing magicians were in Luducia.

Amy nodded along as Finn explained all this, deeply impressed.

“I didn’t know anything about being recognized!”

“That’s because it’s different than getting a license as a healing magician. Very few people receive recognition, so it’s not very well-known. The proofs are usually staffs or jewelry—not items that immediately scream out ‘royal recognition’—which probably makes the whole thing even more obscure.”

Amy was silent for a few moments before quietly asking, “...Is it really okay for someone like me to accept such an amazing honor?”

Finneas had told her that it was incredibly competitive for a healing magician to receive recognition from the kingdom, with at most one person receiving it every few years. Amy may have been skilled in healing magic, but she was still just an assistant—still learning.

Finneas looked at her strangely.

“Why not? If you had applied for a recognition, even as you are now, I’m sure you would have gotten one. You might’ve just received one a little earlier than expected.”

“I think you’re overestimating my abilities, Boss.”

“There is high demand for healing magicians in foreign kingdoms, as well. I think she may have given it to you in advance, before you came of age, to discourage you from going somewhere else—or rather, for insurance that you would stay in Luducia.”

“Leaving the country...”

Amy couldn’t exactly say those plans were totally off the table. She really didn’t want to run away and leave all the friends and animals she had grown so close to over the years.

But...

Just as Amy remembered the game and a sudden rush of anxiety welled up inside her, she chased the feeling away by shaking her head.

“A-Anyway,” Amy said, changing the subject, “I was just shocked that the queen even knew who I was.”

“Do you have any self-awareness at all?” Finneas asked, looking shocked.

“What do you mean?” Amy asked, tilting her head.

“You’re famous, you know.”

“What?! No way. You’ve got to be pulling my leg.”

There was no way that Amy, who exclusively treated animals, stood out to anyone in any way. She chuckled to herself at the idea. Scott was unable to hide his knowing grin, and Finneas sighed, readjusting his monocle with a finger.

“Just take the ring. Don’t think too hard about it. And don’t lose it.”

“Oh! You’re right! It would be terrible if I dropped it!”

Amy was chubby, but she wasn’t very tall, and her hands were on the small side. The queen’s ring, which had been made for a grown woman, didn’t come close to fitting her fingers.

Moreover, Amy touched afflicted parts of the body with her bare hands when performing healing magic, so it would be best if she didn’t wear any jewelry on her hands.

Amy pondered it for a bit before she remembered the pendant necklace she got from Edward, which she wore under her clothes. She put the ring on the chain alongside the pendant. That was a much safer place than her pocket!

Oh? Is there something on the inner part?

As she was threading the chain through the ring, Amy turned the ring and saw the inside of the band. There was something small on the opposite side of the engraved crest. At first, Amy thought it was some surface unevenness caused by the engraving, but it wasn’t—it looked like writing of some kind.

Just as Amy held it up to get a better look at it, the doors to the first-aid room flew open with a *bang!*

“It’s starting!” Sir Dion said in a booming voice. Assistants filed in one after the other behind him, returning from break.

“Oh! Sir Dion!”

From the other side of the door, Amy could hear loud trumpets

announcing the start of the matches, followed by the rumbling sound of the audience's cheers.

"We'll have our hands full before long. Everyone, to your stations."

"Yes, sir!"

Cramming her necklace back under her clothes, Amy donned her healing magician robes.



WORKING in the first-aid room felt like being in a school nurse's office during an overly rambunctious Field Day or an emergency room during the holidays. Amy wondered whether first-aid rooms during tournaments were always like this. There was a constant stream of injured people.

Some of the participants walked there on their own, while others stumbled in supported by a friend or were carried in on stretchers. They even saw a referee that had taken the brunt of an intense attack and a spectator (escorted there by guards) that had gotten overly rowdy and injured themselves.

There just wasn't enough time or magic to heal everyone perfectly.

People with minor injuries were given normal, non-magical care by the nurses—Amy and the other healing magicians prioritized severely wounded patients.

But even then, the magicians used their healing magic pragmatically on the injuries—stopping the bleeding, closing the lacerations. They didn't waste magic on cosmetic elements, like erasing scarring.

The healing magicians may have been performing first-aid, but they were also the top healers in the kingdom. There was a marked difference between their treatments and the medical care received in town.

"My god, this is amazing! I'm sorry for underestimating you, milady!"

The middle-aged adventurer's eyes widened, and he enthusiastically swung around the shoulder that had just been injured.

Not too long ago he had been grumbling, "I can't be healed by

a little girl!" Amy allowed a smile at his change of heart.

Amy had gotten used to those sorts of reactions—she'd been getting comments like that incessantly since the preliminary matches.

But anyone who had visited the first-aid room even once before knew first-hand how excellent of a healing magician Amy was. The man sitting before her today was a part of a team that had been exempted from the preliminary rounds, so it was his first time seeing her.

"It doesn't hurt anymore, right?"

"No! And the bleeding's totally stopped! I can't believe my eyes!"

"The wound isn't completely closed, so try to avoid strenuous exercise for two or three days."

"Really? I feel like I could go hunting tonight if I wanted to!"

"...Surely not?" Amy asked, turning her big eyes up at him. She felt gutted that he would go get himself hurt again after everything she'd done to heal him.

"O-Okay, I get it!" the muscular adventurer said, suddenly timid. "I don't want those guys glaring at me like that, either!"

Platinum-haired Finneas, treating a patient beside them, was shooting the man accusatory glances, and the intimidating glare Sir Dion sent him from further in the room would outmatch even the fiercest ice attack from a magical beast.

"I'll listen to what you say, milady! I may have lost this time, but I'll definitely be back for the next tournament! Make sure you heal me again then, okay?"

"Of course. But I'd be much happier if you won without getting hurt."

"Hahaha! I'm on it!"

The man left noisily, his belly-laugh trailing behind him. Another patient immediately took his place, and Amy repeated the healing process. She had short breaks in between the rotations, where she tried her best to stuff her mouth with cott nuts to replenish her magic power.

I promised Ed that I'd cheer for him, but...how much time has passed?

Amy wondered what had happened during Edward, Harold, and Prince Jahal's matches. She wanted to know how things were progressing, but simply had no time to find out.

As impatient as she felt, she couldn't just leave the injured patients to go check.

The same thing happened with the individual matches yesterday. The more time passed, the more intense the matches became, and the worse the injuries were.

Neither Edward nor Harold had been to the first-aid room, which meant that they hadn't received injuries serious enough to need healing. That, at least, gave her some comfort.

Amy had just seen off a group of patients who had just finished receiving treatment. She sighed, wiping the sweat from her brow with the back of her hand. When she saw the next person enter the first-aid room, she stood up with such force the chair toppled over on the ground with a clatter.

"Prince Jahal?!"

"Amy! Just as I promised, I came so you could heal me."

Jahal's face was ghastly pale, his clothes were dirty, and he clutched at his left arm, which was oozing blood. He acted as confident and self-assured as he always did, but he seemed somewhat deflated. Amy could tell he had lost his match.

Ignoring the nurse, who tried to direct him over to Sir Dion, Jahal plopped down into the chair right in front of Amy. His two teammates had injuries that looked much worse than his, but they hurried to wait behind the prince.

"I'll heal you right away," Amy told Prince Jahal. "Um..." she added, looking at the other two. "You two can be treated over in those seats—"

"No. We will be taken care of afterward."

"Our lord will be healed first."

Although she was slightly flustered from the shock of his arrival, Amy insisted that everyone receive medical treatment, but they just shook their heads. They doubled down on their assertion that they wouldn't get help until they were sure Jahal received proper care. The master-servant relationships in Bakr seemed to be very strong.

Seeing Sir Dion nod, Amy finally assented and reached out her hand.

"Then I'll hurry and heal you. Put your arm there."

"Sure thing. Thanks."

She looked at the injury on his left arm, which seemed to be the worst of it. Pushing aside the torn sleeve, Amy examined the

cut. The tendons and major blood vessels were unscathed.

"I'll touch your arm now to stop the bleeding and close up the wound. Just relax."

As soon as Amy touched him, Jahal hissed in pain. Healing magic flowed from her fingertips to cover up the pain of the wound.

She closed her eyes to concentrate. Against the blackness of her eyelids, Amy suddenly saw a vision of Letizia's face, her eyes welling with tears.

It'll be okay, Letty. I'll heal him.

Letty always tried to act so courageously, but she really had been worried about Jahal... As Amy thought about this, her feelings blended into her magical power.

The magic that flowed from her fingertips suddenly took on a soft glow and wrapped around the injured part of his arm. The light fluctuated in intensity, like the flickering of a firefly, and the wound it surrounded healed right before their eyes. Jahal and his teammates watched with visible shock.

"This is..."

I think that should be enough.

Sensing the reaction to her treatment, Amy stopped the flow of her magic and opened her eyes. The cut had been completely healed.

Completely, totally healed.

The laceration on his arm had closed completely, and there wasn't even the faintest hint of a scar. When Amy looked up, she saw that even the scratches on his cheek had disappeared. She could only see his smooth skin and his handsome features arranged into a shocked expression.

"...Oh," she said.

I overdid it! I didn't heal anyone else this well! Oh! But then again...he's a prince, and this is probably a good thing for maintaining relations with the Kingdom of Bakr...right? Oh gosh, what should I have done?!

"I... I, uh..." Amy stammered.

"Amy," Jahal interrupted.

"D-Does something else hurt—"

"Miss," one of Jahal's team members said, "what on earth was —"

"That's enough," said Jahal, raising his hand and silencing him. "You're really talented, Amy. I'm very satisfied!"

“Th-Thank you. Wha—?”

Jahal suddenly stood.

“I’ll be leaving. You two stay and get healed first,” he ordered the two men standing behind him. He took hold of Amy’s arm and pulled her toward him.

“W-Wait a second!”

“Sir Dion, I’m going to borrow Amy,” Jahal said.

Sir Dion looked up at them, silent for a moment.

“...Understood.”

“P-Professor?!”

“Take a break, Amy,” Sir Dion insisted.

“But—”

Injured patients were coming in one after the other. Amy was perplexed. Sir Dion waved his hand at her impatiently to leave.

She looked to Finneas for help, but for whatever reason, he kept himself busy and didn’t meet her gaze. She knew he could hear them, but he didn’t say anything, so Amy assumed her absence wouldn’t be a problem, but...

“I will accompany you, Your Highness,” Scott quickly offered.

“There’s no need. Let’s go, Amy.”

Jahal started walking, dragging Amy along by her wrist. A guard knight could not disobey the words of a royal.

And so, Amy was dragged out of the first-aid room.



IN contrast to the quiet, stately atmosphere of the morning, it was boisterous outside of the first-aid room. Guards were still stationed everywhere, but the corridors were also filled with civil officials, busy with managing the operations, as well as injured people and their escorts visiting and leaving the first-aid room.

They couldn’t see the tournament stage from outside the first-aid room, but they could hear the cheers and feel the enthusiasm in the air. With the clanging sounds of swords clashing swirling around Amy as she walked, her stride was pushed to its limit trying to keep up with Jahal.

“P-Prince Jahal! Where are we—”

“We don’t have much time! Hurry!”

Jahal kept his hold on Amy’s arm as he marched quietly

forward. It didn't seem like he was in the mood to talk as he walked.

Wait! Seriously! At least walk a little slower...!

With how incessantly he pulled at her arm, Amy was practically running.

She wanted to tell him that she could walk on her own, but she definitely wouldn't have been able to keep up with him if he didn't have a hold of her arm.

A few of the guard knights stationed along the corridors grew concerned when they saw Amy, but once they realized her companion was the prince of Bakr, they fell silent.

After crossing a short corridor, Jahal proceeded in the opposite direction of the waiting room Amy had visited that morning.

Wait... Is he taking me...?

Amy finally got an idea of where they might be headed.

Behind the stage where matches were currently taking place, there was a special viewing room for staff. It was the only other place besides the first-aid room Amy knew how to get to, and it was where she had planned to go during Edward and Harold's matches.

"U-Um..."

"Amy, you're extraordinarily talented with healing magic. But did you really want to be cooped up in that room all day, never getting a chance to cheer for Ed or Alec?"

Jahal had pulled her away to give her a chance to see the match...

"It should be starting soon," he said.

With how busy things were at the first-aid room, it would have been nearly impossible for Amy to have slipped away without Jahal's heavy-handed intervention. And now that she thought about it, it *was* strange that Sir Dion let her leave so easily, whether the one requesting it was a foreign royal or not...

It would make total sense if they had arranged this whole thing beforehand. There were plenty of chances for Jahal and Sir Dion to meet up, whether at school or at the royal palace.

Amy did feel bad when she remembered how crazy things were at the first-aid room, but they also had healing magicians ready to help on standby. Things would probably be all right if she were absent for a little while. She did feel rather selfish for leaving, but she was also happy she could fulfill her promise to Edward.

"Thank you...so much!" Amy told Jahal in between gasps for

air as they continued to scurry down corridors.

“It’s no big deal. Ed’s next opponent is the one who beat me. I think it’ll be hard for him to win, but I don’t want to give him any opportunity to use the excuse, ‘I just wasn’t doing my best because Amy didn’t come to cheer me on!’” said Prince Jahal, his face darkening into a disquieting grimace.

“I-I see...” Amy’s face twitched into a half-smile.

Jahal’s probably really bummed about losing.

Although the tournament had no age restrictions, Jahal was one of the youngest participants. And although he was put into a team with adults—and professionals, at that—they had gone through the tournament as a team of three people, the lowest number of team members you could have in the group competition.

Amy thought he had achieved quite a lot, but Jahal seemed very disappointed by how far he had gotten. It was clear that this was probably exacerbated by the fact that Letizia had been watching him.

And, of course, there was always an element of luck—or match-up compatibility—with one’s opponent.

Bakr was a kingdom with a long-established reputation for swordsmanship, and Jahal naturally knew how to handle a sword. If the tournament were a contest of swords with no magic involved, he could very likely have won the whole thing.

Amy was no expert on the subject, but she thought it must have been difficult for Jahal to go up against magic and bows in long-range fights.

But Ed’s team is also sword-focused...

Now knowing that Ed’s next opponent would be the team that defeated Jahal...Amy suddenly became worried.

“What sort of a...person is...Ed going up against?” Amy panted. “And...can we go...a little slower?”

Amy was usually confident in her stamina, but she had been using her healing magic nonstop all day, and she wasn’t a particularly good runner.

“You’ll find out soon enough. Nice! We made it in time!”

Just as Amy had reached her limit and asked if they could slow down, they arrived at their destination. Going through the doorless archway, they walked into a room roughly the size of a classroom with around ten people already inside.

From the massive glassless window, nearly the size of a sliding

glass door, they could clearly see the stage a little distance away. All the civil officials and guard knights who looked to be on their breaks were facing that direction.

As Amy looked at everyone's backs, she saw an aristocratic man and woman standing slightly apart from everyone else.

"...What?" Amy asked, eyes snapping open and closed in disbelief.

Her own parents were there, standing in the room, along with...

"Tigger?!"

At Amy's shout, Tigger's ears and tail twitched simultaneously and he turned toward her. Tigger immediately started to run, startling the people around him. Amy unconsciously wriggled her hand out of Jahal's and stepped forward.

"Tigger!" she shouted again.

"Whoa!"

Tigger flew at Amy, their bodies colliding with a *thud*! Jahal had scrambled to try and keep her upright, but she fell to the ground before he could reach her.



“What are you doing here? Oh, it doesn’t matter! I’ve missed you so much!”

“Now that’s a little dramatic, Amy,” Isabelle chided. “You just saw him this morning.”

“Oh no, gentlemen!” said Joshua, sounding slightly exasperated. “My daughter is perfectly fine. You don’t have to worry.”

The scene before them had looked so much like a tiger cub hunting a young girl, the knights there on break had reached for the swords at their waists without a second thought.

“I-I see...” the guards replied.

Although Tigger was meowing at her loudly and rubbing against her with considerable force, Amy stroked his fur and hugged him over and over, eyes sparkling with tears at such a happy surprise. It didn’t seem like she heard her mother’s deadpan joke or her father’s embarrassed explanations.

“I see,” Jahal said quietly to himself, watching Amy smiling at Tigger. “She acts totally different with him.”

Amy buried her hands in the cat’s long, fluffy fur, petting it with adoration in every movement. And the cat—although it was quite large for a cat—looked just as taken with her.

Just as Jahal was wondering (slightly spitefully) whether Amy loved Edward or Tigger more, he was approached by the Earl and Countess of Northland.

“Thank you very much for inviting us today, Prince Jahal,” said Joshua.

“Not at all. I know it was a lot to ask you to bring the cat, but it was very interesting to watch. So this is Tigger. He’s just as big as I’ve heard. They seem to be very close, too.”

“Oh! P-Prince J-Jahal, I’m so sorry!”

It had been a clear violation of etiquette for Amy to have thrown off Jahal’s hand. Amy’s face went pale as she finally came to her senses, but Jahal brushed it off, waving his hand magnanimously.

“It’s no problem at all. Letty told me that would happen.”

“L-Letty...”

The corners of his mouth turned up in amusement, and when Amy tried to hide her reddening face in Tigger’s fur, his smile only widened.

I've really done it now! Everyone's looking at me! This is mortifying!

Initially, everyone else in the room had maintained a safe distance because they had been so shocked by Tigger's size. But now that they had been charmed by the sight of the girl and her overly large cat, they looked on, smiling.

All they were doing was watching her, but Amy, who was not used to being the center of attention, felt like she was standing on stage.

Not quite sure what to do with herself, Amy huddled closer against Tigger, trying even harder to hide in his fur. However, the closer she clung to him, the more they looked like a cat-human pretzel.

At that moment, the two other members of Jahal's group that had been left behind in the first-aid room arrived at the viewing room.

"Prince Jahal."

"Did you complete your treatment?" he asked.

"Just as you ordered, my lord," one answered. "We apologize for the wait."

"Oh! Is this the Tigger we've been hearing about?" the other asked. "He really is big...and cute, too."

The two men's eyes had widened when they saw Tigger, but their surprised expressions were cut with a certain tenderness. The people of Bakr seemed to love all cats, regardless of size.

As Amy saw them watch Tigger with such gentle looks—looks that completely belied their rugged warrior appearance—she instinctively knew they were all cut from the same cat-loving cloth.

"Well, see you later, Amy," Jahal said suddenly.

"What?"

Jahal simply pointed to the ceiling.

"Letty's up there," he explained.

It had totally slipped Amy's mind that Letizia, the daughter of a marquess, would be in a room on one of the upper floors reserved for high-ranking aristocrats.

"I was supposed to go up there when my match was over anyway."

"Oh. All right."

"I wanted to see Tigger at least once. It's been hard to make time before today. I'd like to pet him if I could, but I heard Tigger's

shy, so maybe I'll look forward to that next time."

"Sure!"

Although Jahal was studying abroad, he was still royalty. He was able to act somewhat freely in school and at the royal palace, but he still had homework assignments and official duties to tend to. Like Edward, he was a very busy young man.

Having heard so much about Amy and Tigger from Letizia, Jahal had wanted to meet him, too. But "meeting their cat" was much too personal of a reason for a foreign royal to visit the home of an aristocrat and would have most likely resulted in needless speculation.

For that reason, Jahal had used the tournament as an opportunity to invite Amy's parents to the staff viewing area and have them bring Tigger along with them.

After lending a hand to help Amy back to her feet, Jahal glanced toward the tournament stage.

"It's going to start soon. I look forward to seeing who you root for."

"Prince Jahal?"

Amy tilted her head, confused by the implication behind his words. But Jahal didn't answer. He only smiled at Tigger, who nestled right against Amy's legs.

He then squeezed Amy's hand, which he hadn't let go of since helping her up.

"...Amy, why don't you come to Bakr?" he asked in a quiet voice only she could hear.

"What?"

"Letizia's coming home with me when my studies end here. You should come, too."

"Wh-What?"

"I promise you'll be treated very well. I hope you'll think about it... Oh, and I'm sure you already know, but Bakr has a lot of cats," Jahal added, one side of his mouth lifting into a smirk.

He swung her hand before letting it go and left the room without another word.

"We would love for you to visit, as well," said one of his teammates.

"You would be most welcome," said the other.

The two men saluted in the traditional Bakr fashion and followed Jahal out.

Amy watched the three of them leave in a stupor, unconsciously petting Tigger's back.

"What on earth was that about?"

Just as Amy started turning Jahal's words over in her mind, the host announced the start of the next match.

A conspicuously loud cheer swelled up from the audience, and Amy's mind went temporarily blank.

Chapter 8: The Match Begins

AMY was frozen, overwhelmed by the great roar of cheers that seemed to shake the very air around her.

The tournament host used a magical tool that magnified his voice like a megaphone, but because it was pointed toward the spectators, Amy couldn't really catch what he was saying. But from what she could manage to hear through the audiences' screams, he seemed to be announcing the next match.

"It should be starting any minute," said Joshua.

"Come on, Amy, let's get a closer look," urged Isabelle.

They moved toward one of the benches lined up right by the window-like opening in the wall that overlooked the stage. Tigger wanted to sit on Amy's lap, but his fluffy fur totally obscured her view, so she had him sit at her feet instead.

He must have been watching the other matches before Amy got there, but for this match, perhaps frightened by just how loud the screaming and cheering had become, half of his body was glued to Amy's legs.

"It's all right," she murmured, scratching his forehead. He seemed to feel comforted given the way his eyes narrowed happily. She smiled down at him.

With everyone's attention now focused on the upcoming match, no one was looking at Amy anymore. She finally felt the pent-up tension release from her shoulders.

Now that she had calmed down, her thoughts drifted back to Jahal's offer...

He surely just wants me there to keep Letty company...

Letizia was Jahal's number one priority, so he would naturally always be thinking of her first. Jahal had said it so casually, but he didn't act like his offer was a joke, and it certainly hadn't felt like one to Amy...

Amy probably wouldn't be treated poorly in Bakr, having been invited there by the royal family. If they could vouch for her identity and background, she might even be able to work as a

healing magician and support herself.

Not to mention, the cat-loving Kingdom of Bakr had always been the kingdom she had most wanted to visit.

Bakr wouldn't be a terrible place to escape to in an emergency...

Just as that thought crossed her mind, she remembered the feel of Edward's hand against her cheek, and her heart ached.

B-But...

A fiancée *candidate* is not a fiancée.

Without anything legal or public binding Edward and Amy officially, they had no right or say in the other person's actions. In that sense, Amy and Edward were both free to do whatever they liked.

Amy was puzzled to find that that thought made her feel rather sad.

All the characters from the otome game had seemingly made their appearance, but the story didn't seem to be progressing. The characters also seemed different from how they were in the game.

Amy's chief concern, however, was that the invisible hand of the game would start manipulating situations after the heroine showed up. Isabelle had laughed off this worry and insisted that forces like that didn't exist, but the mental images imprinted on Amy's memory were so powerful, she just couldn't help but feel uneasy.

On the other hand, no one knew what the future would hold, whether this was the world of her video game or not...

That was why Amy had to take life by the horns and do everything she could now to the best of her ability...including bracing herself for what was to come.

"Amy?" came Isabelle's voice as she lightly tapped Amy's arm.

"Oh—yes?"

Amy's eyes had probably looked totally glazed over. Isabelle's touch had broken her out of her reverie.

Isabelle pushed Amy's bangs out of her face and looked over her with concerned eyes.

"Are you tired? It must have been really busy at the first aid room, huh?"

"It was, but I'm okay. Mom...is Ed really going to be in this match? That's what Jahal told me."

"That's right," said Joshua, sitting on the other side of Isabelle. "It's the semifinals."

“The semifinals!” Amy jumped in shock.

Edward has advanced that far?

Amy felt a fresh wave of guilt that she hadn’t seen any of his matches before this one.

Edward’s team must have been very strong to have made it to the semifinals, but their opponents were probably just as skilled. Not to mention—this was the team that beat Jahal’s team. Amy had plenty of reason to worry.

“You’ve been watching this whole time, right, Mom? What sort of people are they going up against?”

“Well, you see, it’s quite surprising...”

“How so?”

Isabelle looked torn between concern and excitement. Confused, Amy looked to her father but saw him wearing a similar expression.

“Is there something wrong with the other team?”

“I don’t know if I’d say that, but... Oh! Look! They’re starting!” said Isabelle.

Amy looked where Isabelle was pointing just as the participants started to walk onto the stage.

The first to appear was Alexander, who walked out amidst shouts of joy from the spectators. After he waved a casual hand toward the audience, Amy could hear the loud squeals of female voices even more distinctly.

“Wow... That’s amazing,” said Amy, bowled over by Alec’s popularity.

Isabelle chuckled. “Alec certainly knows his audience.”

Amy had nearly forgotten how objectively appealing Alexander was to girls—not only was he the son of a duke, but he was handsome to boot. Amy had been hanging out with him since she was ten, and during that time she had only ever seen his private persona, where his charm was significantly turned down, so it had slipped her mind.

As Amy looked on in admiration, the next party member came out. It was Kevin, the man she had met that morning.

This time there were deep, booming shouts, mostly from men who looked to be members of the Order of Knights, and Kevin responded by barely raising his hand with a grim look on his face.

After Kevin, the third party member walked out on the stage.

At that moment, the thundering screams erupted like a

volcano.

“Ed...”

The Third Prince of Luducia had walked on the stage.

Edward was always more low-profile than his older brothers, but as he stood there imposingly in front of a roaring crowd, there was certainly something special about him. The cheers were likely a testimony to how bravely he had fought in the day’s matches.

All three of them were wearing Order of Knights uniforms, with swords hanging from the same spot at their waist.

Amy had never seen him in this kind of armor before.

He almost looks like a stranger.

Ed looked awe-inspiring as he waved his hand in response to the cheers. He looked so unlike himself, Amy felt a strange sense of loneliness. She brushed aside those feelings and strained her eyes, concentrating...

I don’t see any visible injuries... It doesn’t look like he’s hiding anything, either.

He looked tired, but unscathed. Amy breathed a sigh of relief.

Edward smiled and looked out over the venue, packed with people. His searching gaze finally landed on the staff viewing area. When his eyes finally found Amy, they sparkled so happily that her breath got momentarily stuck in her throat.

Edward gave her a tiny wave from his position, close to the ground, and Amy somehow managed to wave back at him.

It was just a smile and wave, but in response, something welled up inside Amy that made her ears ring and her heart start racing. Amy wasn’t sure what was louder—the cheers, the audience stamping their feet on the ground, the applause, or the hammering of her own heart?

She reached down for Tigger, who was all too happy to be picked up, and pressed her face against his body. She focused on the tiny beating of his heart, his soft, fluffy fur, and the warmth of his body. Surrounded by these relaxing sensations, it became a little easier for Amy to breathe.

“He noticed you, Amy!” exclaimed Isabelle. “Amy? What *are* you doing?”

“My heart can’t take this...”

“You were just as nervous during Hal’s kraken hunt before, too. I know you’re not quite used to it, but you have to put your fears aside and properly show him your support!”

Amy groaned.

“I’ll try...”

“The match hasn’t even started yet!” Isabelle added with a teasing grin.

Amy timidly poked her head out from behind Tigger.

With Tigger’s triangular ears periodically twitching at the bottom of her field of vision, Amy watched Edward as he turned back toward the general audience seating. Just then, his opponents walked out from the opposite end of the stage.

Her eye was initially drawn to their clothes, which were clothes typically worn by adventurers. Three of them wore cloaks and had a sword, a spear, and a crossbow, respectively. The last member was covered from head to toe in a hooded robe and seemed to be an archer.

There were four members on the opponent’s team—one more than Edward’s team.

According to the tournament rules, if the difference in the number of team members was less than two, the match could go on. It wasn’t uncommon for the team with fewer members to win the match, but you couldn’t help feeling uneasy about the odds.

When the four team members got close enough that Amy could see their faces, her eyes widened in shock.

“What? Is that...*Harold*?”

It was her older brother, Harold, who raised his right hand and responded triumphantly to the huge applause from the audience. Looking more closely, Amy realized the two members flanking him with a spear and crossbow were Gilbert and Nicholas.

Amy nearly stood from her seat in shock.

She had remembered Edward and Jahal’s placements had been nearly on opposite sides of the tournament bracket, but she hadn’t known the details of the lineup, like when they could expect to take on Harold’s team. Team withdrawals or unexpected absences shook up the order quite frequently.

Amy was frozen in shock, but Isabelle was very excited.

“I bet you were so surprised!” she cried.

“Of course I was! Wh-Why is this happening?!”

“There’s no deep meaning behind it,” said Joshua. “It’s just how tournaments work.”

“They both won their matches, and now they’ll face each other,” Isabelle added helpfully.

“Face each other?! How can you two talk about this so lightly?!”

For whatever reason, Amy had firmly believed that Edward and Harold wouldn’t have to fight each other, so the thought never crossed her mind that the bracket would come to this.

No matter how many times Amy rubbed her eyes, Edward and Harold stood on opposite ends of the stage.

Harold finally noticed his family watching and gave them a thumbs-up. Isabelle waved her hand back excitedly. This was their son’s moment in the spotlight—even Joshua looked a little proud. Amy was the only one plagued by turmoil.

“So which side are you going to cheer for, Amy?”

“Which side...?”

She remembered that Prince Jahal had asked her the same thing.

But the question just caused her more anxiety. She wanted Edward to win, of course...but she didn’t want Harold to lose, either!

As Amy struggled to come up with an answer, Isabelle gave her a small smile and changed the subject.

“Have you met their new party member yet?”

“O-Oh, Yasmine! No, not yet. I went to their waiting room this morning, but she and Harold were out training.”

“I see. Well, look—she’s the slightly shorter one next to Hal.”

“Hm...” Amy looked down at them. “There she is. I see her.”

Yasmine was the one with the bow wearing a hooded robe. She was about a head shorter than Harold.

Amy was a little surprised. Even though Yasmine had fulfilled a support role, she had still been a freelance adventurer, so Amy had imagined she’d be a little more muscular.

“Her hood’s in the way, so you can’t really see her— Oh, she’s taking it off.”

Yasmine removed her hood with a *flap*, and underneath, a *pink blonde* ponytail was revealed.

That was not a common hair color. Amy’s heart pounded against her ribcage. Harold pointed in their direction and whispered in Yasmine’s ear. She turned to look where Amy was sitting, and their eyes met.

“What?!” Amy cried.

She’s the heroine!

Her looks had changed a little bit with age, but there was no mistaking it. She was the girl Amy had seen in her grandfather's territory, the port city of Wallum. However, Amy didn't have any proof that the girl was the heroine, and she hadn't seen her in the four years since that trip.

Nevertheless, not a day had gone by when Amy hadn't thought of her.

"You remember when Harold and the others took down the kraken, there was that boat that didn't get away in time? That's the girl from that boat!"

"I-I remember..."

As Isabelle confirmed the girl's identity, her voice seemed very far away.

There was a bell-like ringing somewhere in the back of Amy's head. Even the deafening cheers from the audience seemed to be muffled by some invisible barrier.

Amy could feel her own arms trembling as she held Tigger.

B-But...the girl back then had a different name...

Through her turbulent thoughts and emotions, Amy suddenly remembered that "Yasmine" had just been a nickname given by Harold. The thought didn't give her any comfort. The heroine gave Amy a slight bow with a nervous look before returning to her original position.

On the tournament stage, Edward, Harold, and the heroine were lined up along their respective teams, facing each other at a distance.

Amy couldn't even blink.

A loud ringing signaled the start of the match, and everyone moved at once.

Harold's team was the first to launch an attack. Yasmine quickly took out an arrow from the quiver on her back and launched it overhead as she progressively fell back behind her teammates.

The arrow arched high in the air and split into several arrows on its descent.

"What?"

Just as Edward and the others were trying to get into their battle formation, the arrows pierced the stage with loud *thuds* in an evenly spaced, horizontal line just behind them.

Just one arrow had been shot, but nearly ten had come raining

down.

The length and the makeup of the arrows had changed, too. Now nearly as tall as Edward, they lined up behind them like hard iron bars, preventing their retreat.

Clicking his tongue in annoyance, Kevin tried to run off to the side, but a shot fired from Nicholas's crossbow pierced the ground right by his feet, stopping him in his tracks.

Yasmine continued applying pressure, sending arrow after arrow flying at them. They landed in lines along each side of them.

She's trapped them in a long, narrow cage!

There was one small opening to the open-air cage, blocked by Gilbert, wielding his spear.

Just moments after the match began, Harold's team's long-range attacks had created an overwhelmingly favorable set-up.

Yasmine and Nicholas continued to rain arrows down upon Edward's helplessly trapped team from overhead. Arrows that missed started to gather at their feet, and Kevin barely managed to deflect a spear attack with his sword by the entrance. They were backed into fighting purely defensively.

"Man, they didn't waste any time!"

"They're doing just as great as the last match!"

The audience's excitement from the breathtaking outset of the match continued to bubble up, with cheers and screams echoing up into the sky with every movement.

No! Oh my god, no! Augh! That was so close! I can't take this anymore! Watch out!

With every clanging and thudding sound that loudly reverberated with every exchange of blows, Amy flinched and ducked behind Tigger. This wasn't Amy's first time at an athletic tournament. She came to watch the last time her brother had participated.

But, perhaps because she hadn't watched the match from so close up, or perhaps because her family had been totally relaxed about the whole thing, she hadn't been too worried then.

She wished she could look away from the rapid-fire attacks, but not watching just wasn't an option. Amy desperately kept her eyes forward, trembling slightly as she half-hid her face in Tigger's fur.

She had been stunned by the iron bars that kept Edward's team confined, but her parents only looked impressed. Edward

didn't look flustered either—he seemed to be coping with the setback well enough.

Yasmine's arrow-morphing technique must have been used in previous matches, too. Her arrows looked totally normal, but they changed form and multiplied. There was only one way to explain such a phenomenon—magic.

"Yasmine uses illusion magic, then?" Amy asked.

"It's not just any old illusion, either," Joshua explained. "It's a high-level technique that materializes the illusion into matter when visible. Quite impressive!"

Amy nodded.

Some magic could only be invoked if the individual possessed a certain magical trait. One of the most extreme forms of this was illusion magic.

As long as someone had magical aptitude and underwent training, anyone could use magic, at least to some extent. Even though Amy's specialty, healing, was quite difficult to learn, it was still theoretically possible.

With illusion magic, however, no matter how much a person trained, if they didn't have the right aptitude for it, they would never be able to use it.

In fact, this was the first time Amy had seen anyone use it besides Sir Dion and Finneas.

And Yasmine could not only conjure illusions—she could even materialize them. That was something not even Finneas, the greatest young magician in Luducia, could do.

Amy knew that Yasmine, outstanding at manipulating magic, had made a name for herself as an adventurer using this as her weapon.

It was only natural that the audience would get so excited about the illusion magic, which they rarely got to see. During their brief conversation, the cheering never stopped—and neither did the match.

Edward's team assumed their battle formation—Kevin in front and Alexander and Edward at the rear—and returned fire.

Not a single arrow that Yasmine or Nicholas fired had hit anyone. Alexander had knocked away many of the arrows by swinging his sword above their heads, but that wasn't the only reason for these miraculous misses...

An arrow slipped past Alexander's sword and was heading

straight for Edward.

Amy gasped, and then heard a hard sound. The arrow that was just about to pierce Edward's shoulder was repelled and fell to the ground.

"Ed's defensive barrier!"

Edward's long sword—still in its scabbard—was planted tip-down on the ground, and as he gripped the sheath with both hands, he kept a careful eye on his surroundings. With the sword as a conduit, his defensive magic flowed out like water and was even able to reach Kevin and Alexander.

The power, which covered their bodies like a thin film, protected the three of them from physical attacks.

"Can you see that, Amy?" Isabelle asked.

"Yes."

There were individual differences when it came to magic power. Generally, many aristocrats had magical aptitude, but whether they could use it was another matter entirely.

In the same vein, while Amy and Isabelle could see the flow of magical power, Joshua unfortunately couldn't pick up on it without a measuring tool.

Isabelle started commentating on what was going on for Joshua's sake, and Joshua nodded along and chattered back. As Amy absently listened to this, she looked at Edward's magic for the first time.

It's incredible.

She had heard that Edward excelled at defensive magic, but she had only ever seen the basics of it before in class. His current defensive barrier was protecting not only himself, but several other people, who were moving around, for an extended period of time.

It was very complex magic and required incredible casting stability and absolutely zero magic power waste. Amy was impressed on all counts.

"So this is the reason they haven't gotten injured in their previous matches," she said.

"That's right. The three of them barely have a scratch!"

Edward had often praised Amy's healing magic, but what he was doing was unbelievable! Perhaps his massive magic supply was a hereditary trait of the royal family. But even so, Amy had never seen such a beautiful flow of magic power.

It's a gentle, strong magic.

Sir Dion's magic power was extraordinary, of course, and Amy thought the clever way Finneas composed his magic was amazing. But in Amy's eyes, Edward's defensive magic had a special glimmer.

As Amy gazed, transfixed, the magic power Yasmine had imbued the arrows with ran out, and the iron bars that had surrounded them returned to their original size with a *woosh*.

Edward's team went on the offensive the moment the barriers disappeared. Still surrounded by Edward's defensive magic, Alexander and Kevin launched themselves forward with impressive speed.

Kevin got in range to attack, but Gilbert just managed to stop Kevin's sword with the handle of his spear. Nicholas, who had swapped his crossbow for his short sword, rushed to Gilbert's aid as Alexander gleefully approached Harold.

Edward's team seemed to have a slight advantage when it came to short-range blows with swords.

But these were adventurers, after all. There was nothing typical or standard about the way they fought, even when on the defensive, and Kevin and Alexander were struggling to adapt.

Harold had been fighting with one sword initially, but Alexander was managing to push him back with his attacks, so Harold finally reached for his second blade. Alexander suddenly saw one of the swords coming at him from the corner of his eye, but the defensive barrier blocked the attack with a dull *thud*.

Though his surprise attack had been thwarted, Harold smirked in amusement.

"Harold looks quite composed, don't you think?" asked Joshua.

"Yes, and Alec looks like he's having a blast, too!" Isabelle replied.

How can they possibly watch this so calmly?! They're acting like they're watching baseball or soccer or something!

No matter how fascinated she was by Edward's magic, it didn't erase her anxiety. She was so tense she saw dots of light flashing before her eyes.

Amy knew that serious accidents were very rare. They fought for real in the tournament, but they weren't at war with each other—they were matches.

Moreover, they were matches held in the presence of the king.

And the participants were nearly all knights and adventurers—

people that directly had an impact on the kingdom's military power. Although it would be disrespectful to the king if they didn't fight with everything they had, for the sake of the kingdom's defenses, it was imperative that they not fight till the point of death or bodily injury that would make them incapable of fighting in the future.

That was why those in charge of the tournament always arranged for skilled healing magicians to wait on standby and crafted the rules with a very strict hand.

For weapons in particular, participants were allowed to use their own personal weapons as long as they complied with the tournament rules and passed inspections for unfair tampering beforehand. The magical attacks that could be used on another person were severely limited, as well.

Even in regular sports, players can get hurt if they are hit by the ball—even injured.

Amy, who had seen many injured people in the first aid room, knew very well that you couldn't call the tournament perfectly safe.

Harold gradually started to push back against Alexander with his dual blades until finally, Alexander fell to one knee.

With his arm slightly raised, Alexander managed to keep his sword at the ready, but Harold used his magic to jump high in the air, and as he came down with magically amplified acceleration, his dual blades flashed brilliantly in the sunlight.

Amy squeezed Tigger and squinted her eyes as far as she could while still being able to see Edward running over to Alec.

As Edward had concentrated his defensive magic in front of him, he slid in front of Alexander while effortlessly drawing his sword.

Edward heard Amy shouting his name, drowned out by the loud, clanging noise of metal hitting metal.

Even though he'd deflected most of the power behind Harold's attack, his pivot leg had been pushed back by the sheer force, kicking up a cloud of dust in the process, and numbness spread down his arm all the way to his shoulder.

Even in the midst of the chaos around him, Edward suddenly realized that, contrary to the sounds they made, Harold's swords were quite heavy.

It was a different kind of swordsmanship and power than those

General Riley and Kevin utilized. Edward was able to experience firsthand that neither style was objectively superior—they were simply different.

“You’ll be fighting me now,” Edward told Harold.

“Well done! I was so sure it was all over,” he replied.

As Edward and Harold exchanged blows, they moved away from Alexander, who was still panting hard.

Harold spoke casually even as he unleashed consecutive dual-blade techniques with his twin blades without any restraint.



Because Edward and Harold were locked in a fierce fight at point-blank range, Yasmine was unable to shoot her arrows. She tried to join the fight to help, but Harold kept her at bay with a look, so she had no choice but to stop some distance away and wait for an opportunity.

The whole while, Kevin had been tirelessly taking on Nicholas and Gilbert simultaneously. His battle was the first to reach a conclusion.

With his sword knocked out of his hands, Kevin blocked Gilbert's spear attack with his bare hands. At that moment, Nicholas placed his short sword against Kevin's neck.

"I think that's finally checkmate, Kevin," said Nicholas.

"Nick, Gil... I wouldn't expect anything less from you two."

"Oh! Kevin just gave us a compliment!" Gilbert cheered.

"Good grief... Don't look so happy with yourselves," Kevin sighed heavily. "I'm exhausted!"

The three young men wiped the sweat from their brows, transforming from rivals to old classmates once again, and they looked on at Edward and Harold, still locked in battle.

Just then, Edward's sword finally fell from his hands.



I might have had a heart attack if this had gone on any longer!

Just when Amy couldn't stand watching anymore, the semifinals came to a close.

With their shoulders heaving from exertion, both Edward and Harold looked at the sword that had fallen to the ground.

A look of disappointment and understanding came to Edward's face. After storing his dual blades in their sheaths, Harold offered him his hand. The handshake they exchanged looked firm even from a distance, each giving praise for the other's efforts.

A short distance away, Alexander and Kevin were clapping each other on the shoulders. The venue, which had fallen into a hushed silence the moment the match had been decided, was now shaking with thunderous cheers.

As Amy clung to Tigger, she found herself on her feet before she knew it.

It had taken every last bit of her willpower to watch the match

until the moment Edward's sword had left his hand—after that moment, her face had been pressed hard against Tigger.

When the referee announced the official victory call, another thundering wave of applause filled the stadium as both teams left the stage.

Harold's team had some time to rest before moving on to the final match. He waved a hand briefly toward the staff viewing room before heading straight to his waiting room in the back.

Several figures, however, were heading right toward where they were sitting.

"Amy, look!"

Isabelle tried to bring this to her attention, but Amy, still hiding her face in Tigger's fluff, just shook her head.

"I-I can't take this anymore! Hal is such an *idiot*!"

"You think so? I'm perfectly happy with how things turned out. I've always wanted to go up against Hal."

"Wha—Alec?!"

Amy looked up in surprise and saw the three young men that had just been battling on the stage.

Alexander stood right in front of her. His handsome face was quite dirty, and his clothes were torn and ragged. But Amy's heartfelt relief at the expression on his face—one of complete bliss.

Alexander nonchalantly brushed back a loose strand of hair that had fallen out of place. The sunlight created a natural glittering effect around him, and it looked exactly like a screenshot taken from an otome game.

That's certainly fitting.

But the momentary distraction had brought her senses back to reality, and Amy felt herself calming down a little bit. She was belatedly trying to find the right words to praise them for their good fight, when—

"Oh my word, that was so inspiring!"

"Sir Riley! Tough luck out there!"

"Eeek!" Amy squeaked.

A massive wave of excited knights came spilling in like a Tokyo train during rush hour. In the bustle, Amy stumbled out of the massive window-door opening onto the grounds.

With both of her hands occupied holding Tigger, she very quickly lost her balance and felt herself stumble.

And suddenly she was caught.

“Are you okay? That was close.”

Naturally, Edward had been the one to save both Amy and Tigger from crashing onto the ground. He led her away from the chaotic scene wrapped in his secure arms.

When Amy looked back, she saw Kevin surrounded by a large crowd.

“That match was really something else!”

“Taking on two people at once! The skill!”

“It was so awesome how you deflected that spear!”

“Please...” Kevin said, sighing. “Could you guys be a little quieter?”

Kevin looked totally exhausted and like he’d rather not be dealing with the crowd of hyped-up military guys pressing in on him.

Alexander shrugged his shoulders, looking exasperated. Edward smiled awkwardly.

“They caught him good,” said Alec.

“Kevin’s adored by his subordinates too,” said Edward.

“They’re more like his fanboys, if anything.”

Amy suddenly remembered that Kevin had worked behind the scenes for the tournament. It made sense why there had been so many staff in the viewing room for the match.

Amy wondered if it was okay that they were just ignoring the Third Prince and the son of a duke, but then again, the boys probably wouldn’t want to be smothered by that stuffy crowd, either. In fact, she felt like Alexander and Edward were trying to make themselves as inconspicuous as possible.

When the enthusiastic fervor around them abated slightly, Amy, still in Edward’s arms, looked up at him.

His breathing was back to normal, but he looked as tired as might be expected of someone after a hard-fought battle. She was viscerally reminded of when he had ridden back to the royal capital on horseback.

Edward may have lost the match, but he looked surprisingly relieved. He must have given the fight everything he had.

“Oh! Sorry. I’m getting you all dirty, aren’t I?” Edward took his arms off her, worried about his dirty clothes rubbing off on her.

“No, you aren’t,” said Amy, shaking her head.

Even at a time like this, Edward was concerned about Amy. Thinking back on it, he had always shown concern for her.

"I wasn't able to really show you what I'm made of," he said.

"That's—"

That's not true. You were so strong.

That was what Amy wanted to say, but the words didn't come out.

Instead, tears spilled from her eyes.

"What? Amy?"

"Oh!" said Alec. "I'm going to head back, Ed. Catch you later."

"W-Wait! Alec!"

But just as Edward shouted to him, Alexander turned on his heel and walked away, brushing off the other people calling out to him as he went.

As Amy watched Alec walk away, she realized she had been so timid she hadn't even been able to congratulate him properly, and she started crying again.

"Um... Don't cry, Amy."

Edward, who was three years older than her and always so calm, clearly didn't know what to do. He put a hand on her shoulder to try and soothe her and looked at her with an anxious, panicked expression.

But Amy still couldn't stop the large tears from spilling from her eyes. She used everything she had to choke down her watery, wavering voice as a few tears dropped onto Tigger's long fur.

"Ed..." she said.

"Yes?"

Amy finally looked up, and Edward was looking at her with a slightly relieved expression on his face. Fresh tears immediately made it look blurred.

"Ed...did you...get hurt?"

"No, I'm fine."

"You're lying."

At the end of the match, he had been covering his right hand to keep it from being noticed. Even though she had almost looked away so many times, she had seen that part clearly.

Amy stared him down with wet eyes. Edward eventually sagged his shoulders and smiled.

"Okay, I got hurt a little bit."

"You shouldn't have tried to hide it."

"I'm sorry. I didn't want to worry you."

Amy suddenly wiped away the tears that were falling down

her face and took a look at the arm Edward held out to her. Underneath the cuff of his sleeve, the area around his wrist was swollen and red. It was clearly inflamed and painful.

It probably wasn't broken, but it might have been fractured.

Amy put Tigger down at her feet and, perhaps sensing that she was acting differently than usual, he did not put up a fight. He quietly and patiently sat against her legs as she worked.

Amy covered Edward's wrists with both hands.

"Amy, you don't have to do this now."

"I'm the one who's going to do it."

She had promised to heal him herself. She gently channeled all her magic power to his feverish wrist so that it would heal quickly.

Under Edward's shadow, the faintly glowing magic couldn't be seen from the stands.

Edward's stunned, serious gaze alternated between his own wrist, which was rapidly hurting less and less, and Amy, whose eyes were closed as she channeled the healing magic.

"Amy, it feels all better now. Thank you."

When she heard those words, Amy started to move her hands away from his arm. Edward caught one of them with his hand to stop her from stepping back.

Their closeness, which usually made her feel embarrassed and flustered, didn't bother her now, so she stayed where she was. That was how different she felt at this moment.

"It doesn't hurt at all anymore. You're healing magic is really amazing, Amy," said Edward. "And it was really warm, just like you."

Amy didn't speak.

"Amy?"

"...I was scared."

The tears that had been put on pause came tumbling down her face again.

Edward took a step closer so he could hear Amy's wobbling voice, nearly drowned out by the voices around them. There was practically no space between them anymore.

"I was...really scared."

"I know. I'm sorry."

Amy never liked conflict. But she had no idea that just watching the match would make her feel so wretched. She stuttered out her sentences, occasionally broken up by the *hic* of her sobs.

"I was scared—by the arrows—and swords..."

"I know."

"And your—defensive barrier—was so pretty—I thought things would be—okay—but..."

"I know."

His soothing interjections and the feel of his arm, which had at some point wrapped protectively around her back, made Amy gradually return to her senses.

Then, the horror from before crawled back up her body.

She really should have been using this time to praise how he fought in the match! His defensive magic was spectacular, and his sword-fighting skills against Harold were amazing, too.

But all Amy could think about was how glad she was it was over.

It wasn't that Edward's strength wasn't impressive or that she didn't believe in it...

"I just couldn't stand it if you got hurt, or if anything happened to you..."

It was just a match. She had told herself that so many times, but it was no use.

But the fact of the matter was that Amy had no idea of knowing if or when something might happen to him, be it something commonplace or out of the ordinary.

There were no save files in her life. No reset buttons.

She couldn't just try again.

So Amy was scared...scared of losing Edward.

Edward placed a gentle hand against Amy's cheek, like he was holding the most precious thing in the world. With the back of his fingers, he wiped her tears away. Amy closed her eyes.

"I'm sorry for scaring you," said Edward, stroking her hair.

Amy could only feel kindness from his touch.

No, it's not your fault, Ed.

Amy couldn't properly thank him. She couldn't even stop crying. She hated that all she ever did was make him apologize.

"Amy..."

Amy slowly looked up at him. Under the sunlight, the eyes that looked at her with such concern were practically silver. Like a mirror, Amy could see her own tear-stained face reflected back at her.

I hate that face.

Whether they lived in the world of a video game or not, Amy hadn't worked so hard all this time just to trouble such a kind person.

It was so she could spend her days smiling and laughing with her family, Tigger, and the people closest to her...

Oh.

Something suddenly clicked into place.

At that moment, Amy didn't care about anything—not the crowd of people nor the noisy voices echoing around them.

Tigger looked up at her from the ground. She locked eyes with him for a brief moment before making up her mind.

Edward's hand continued to wipe away Amy's never-ending stream of tears. Amy took it with her own hand and pushed his palm firmly against her cheek—just as she had that night in the carriage.

Closing her eyes once more, she slowly let out a deep breath.

When she opened her eyes again, she saw Edward's stunned face. In his round eyes, Amy could still see the tear stains on her cheeks, but she also saw her face beaming with happiness.

“...ve you.”

“What was that?”

Amy had summoned all of her strength, but she hadn't been able to say the words loud enough for him to hear.

She would need courage to say it again. Amy regretted not being able to communicate her feelings through the hand touching her cheek... But some things needed to be said out loud.

Amy took a deep breath. The tears that had clung to her lashes fell on her cheeks, and Edward started to panic again, which made Amy laugh a little.

“It's just, I...”

“I know,” Edward said comfortingly.

Amy's face broke out into a grin at last. Edward looked openly relieved. He didn't seem to do well with people crying.

In that case, I'll always smile.

She squeezed his hand, and her gold eyes met his silver ones.

Even if this really is the world of an otome game... Even if this is the work of an irresistible force driving the plot...

“...I love you, Ed.”



Amy couldn't say it very loudly, but he should have been able to hear her this time.

As evidence that he did, Edward, after a beat, blushed red up to his ears. He seemed to be at a loss for words.

I-I'm blushing, too...!

Amy's cheeks and ears were unmistakably red. She was certain she had just made a mess of things.

With his eyes looking everywhere, Edward mumbled something quietly, and then their eyes met again.

Amy saw him break into a toothy grin for the first time. She was thrilled—and relieved—and this time, Amy was the one asking him to repeat himself.

“What was that, Ed?”

“Yes... I've always loved you, Amy.”

The people around them were as noisy as ever.

Whether the noise was because of their lingering excitement from the match, or for another reason entirely, Amy, completely hidden in Edward's arms, had no idea.

Chapter 9: Two People in the VIP Room

ALEXANDER stood in the VIP viewing room on the second story, looking down from the window at the scene below. He snorted to himself.

“About time, huh?” he muttered, sounding pleased.

“You really shouldn’t be spying on them,” Rosalind chided.

“Perhaps, Rosalind, but if they’re out in the open like that, they’re bound to get noticed.”

“You still shouldn’t.”

From the window, the two of them could clearly see Edward and Amy standing a short distance away from the group of people surrounding Kevin. Alexander couldn’t hear what they were saying to each other, of course, but they seemed intimately close. Finally, he saw Amy put Tigger down on the ground.

He caught a glimpse of a soft light, which was sure to be Amy’s healing magic.

This window was the best spot in the venue to watch the matches, but now that there was an intermission, Alexander and Rosalind were the only two in the room. He had made a beeline for the window as soon as he got there.

“Don’t most participants go to the first aid room or their waiting room after a match?” Rosalind asked. “Why did you come here first? There’s no rush—there’s plenty of time before the final match. That’s what Jahal did,” she added, growing suspicious and firing a quick look toward where Letizia and the others had gone inside.

Having only sloppily brushed the dust off his clothes, Alexander was still dirty, and even though his injuries weren’t severe, they still hadn’t been treated.

Alexander only turned his face toward Rosalind. He didn’t look like he wanted to move from where he was leaning beside the window. He looked amused, the corners of his mouth lifting at the way Rosalind’s protest was disguised as an honest question.

“I guess you’re right. Why don’t you take me to the first aid

room then, Rosalie?”

“I told you not to call me...” Rosalind sighed. “All right. Let’s get you looked at right away.”

“Really? You’ll join me?” Alexander asked, eyes widening in genuine shock, despite being the one who invited her.

“I’m just using it as an excuse to get out of here,” Rosalind whispered back, looking around the room furtively.

The stadium was extremely plain, its appearance exuded only brute strength, but the inside of the VIP rooms, particularly the room on the uppermost floor for the royal family, were decorated quite elaborately.

A carpet was spread over the large room, and gorgeous tapestries hung from the walls. The windows that faced the stage were surrounded by ornately decorated frames.

Light snacks and refreshments were also provided in the VIP rooms, making them an elegant watering hole for famous, high-ranking aristocrats to congregate and mingle with one another.

Rosalind had been planning to watch the team matches as a normal citizen from the general audience seating with her relatives. But after Letizia came to pick her up the night before, totally out of the blue, Rosalind ended up spending the night at the marquess’s house and had come with them to the stadium that morning.

It had been a nice perk being able to visit the waiting rooms before the matches, even though she wasn’t anyone’s family member or fiancée. But Rosalind had never expected that she would be brought all the way to the VIP room.

“I’m very thankful for the invitation, but I think it would be strange for me to be in a room like that,” Rosalind had tried to protest.

“Really? I don’t think so,” was all Letizia said in response.

The maids had meticulously prepared Rosalind’s hair and face at Letizia’s house that morning. Even the dress they let her wear that day complemented her features wonderfully, so she didn’t stick out like a sore thumb with all the other high-bred ladies in the room.

But this was a room for famous, high-ranking nobles only.

Allowances had been made for Rosalind because she was a friend of Letizia’s and an acquaintance of Duchess Camilla, but as a lady from the countryside that hadn’t even debuted in society yet, simply existing in that room made her feel inferior.

Even so, when she was with Letizia, Rosalind managed to hold her own somehow despite her nerves, but ever since Jahal came in, things rapidly started falling apart. Letizia had repeatedly looked to Rosalind to rescue her from his attentions, but as any intervention would have just been futile on her part, Rosalind took the initiative and became a wallflower.

That was why when Alexander walked in, Rosalind instinctively became slightly—no, incredibly relieved.

It's such a relief when there's someone you know in a situation like this!

"This is no place for a country bumpkin, you know," Rosalind sighed.

"You're being oddly uptight," Alexander remarked.

"This is how I always am."

"And that's what I like about you."

He always casually said things that might lead her to get the wrong idea if she took him seriously. They had always joked around like this, so Rosalind rarely fully believed everything that came out of Alexander's mouth. With how stressed she was about even being there, Rosalind couldn't afford to brush it off as a joke.

"You're joking, right?"

"I'm very much serious. Oh! Rosalie, look!"

"Wait! Alec!"

Alexander suddenly grabbed her shoulders and marched her to the window.

He told her to look down, and she did so with some trepidation. Below, Rosalind saw Amy and Edward hugging each other—or rather, Edward holding Amy tightly in his arms.

"Good for you, Ed," Alexander muttered with a relaxed expression. His mouth smiled in a gentle curve and looked totally genuine—he meant what he said.

"...Are you really okay with this?" Rosalind asked, the question falling from her lips.

"Oh? Do you doubt me? It's nice to see your childhood friend's first love work out."

"I suppose you're right..." Rosalind said evasively to Alexander's confident reply.

Rosalind knew Alexander was fond of Amy. He never denied it, and even though he was old enough for a fiancée to be arranged for him, he always avoided the subject, further substantiating

Rosalind's suspicions.

The only reason she and Alexander were close was because they had become friendly with each other through the endless practices for her music recital.

"I like Amy. I had been thinking of asking her to marry me if things didn't go well with Ed," Alexander answered nonchalantly.

But that was as far as Rosalind's suspicions were correct.

"If you take in a former fiancée candidate of a prince who broke off their engagement, wouldn't that make the royal family indebted to you too?"

"Huh?"

Amy was currently the only fiancée candidate for the Third Prince, and naturally had not been allowed to look for any other partners besides Edward. Even if Amy were to drop out of the running now, nearly all of the age-appropriate partners had already paired off.

And even if Amy didn't have anything to do with why the engagement didn't work out, rumors would spread like wildfire that it was because she wasn't a woman capable of being anyone's fiancée. It would become incredibly hard for her to find a good match, and that would be on the royal family's conscience.

But if she were to marry into the Duke of Coverdale's family—a branch of the royal family—it would be a different matter entirely. Amy would not only avoid vilification but she would be rewarded for her many years of being in the restrictive position of the Third Prince's fiancée candidate.

"So it would be an act of kindness?"

"Hm... I can't say that's not part of it. There wouldn't be any trouble from my parents if I chose Amy, either."

"But what about Amy's feelings?"

Alexander laughed.

"You're one to talk! You were about to marry a man so old he's a grandfather for your family's sake."

Rosalind was at a loss for words. *She* had been the one who had been initially weighing her marriage options so that there "wouldn't be any trouble" with her family.

She even felt like Alexander's situation was much better—at least he liked his would-be partner.

"I-I was going to, but you—"

"Yeah, I put a stop to it. And I still don't feel bad about it," he

added, his amused voice sounding sincere.

The duke's estate had sent word to Rosalind's marriage candidates to put a stop to their attentions, and they had all withdrawn their proposals. Not only did Rosalind's family have to return to the drawing board in their search, but every family they approached shied away from the match, putting the entire marriage hunt on hold.

Her parents and guardians spoke of marriage candidates less and less, and Rosalind had more and more free time to read.

It was starting to look like she would graduate without securing a fiancé, but Rosalind wasn't particularly disappointed—she wouldn't even care if she remained unmarried her entire life.

She wanted to say that it was all Alexander's fault, but really, she felt like she should be thanking him.

Alexander had such a wide social circle of men and women alike, but in reality, these were all superficial relationships. Deep down, he was the type of person who would keep an eye out for his best friend, go to great lengths to protect the girl he liked, and stop a friend from marrying out of a compromise...

He only thinks of other people, Rosalind realized.

"Alec...has anyone ever called you a good person?"

"No. This would be a first."

"Just as I thought. It's not exactly a fitting description of a territory manager and businessman."

"That's fine. I'll have a wife with a strong enough character for the both of us," he said, suddenly grabbing Rosalind's hand and kissing the back of it.

Alexander had escorted her places many times before, but this was the first time he had ever kissed her hand. Rosalind stood there in shocked silence.

"So marry me, Rosalie."

"Wh... What?!"

"You're really that surprised? I thought I had planned the lead-up so well, too..." Alexander said, metaphorically tossing her another bomb while she was still reeling in shock.

Wait a minute... This was all a lead-up to a proposal?!

Rosalind was desperately trying to remember what they had just talked about, but she wasn't succeeding very well. Her mouth opened and closed, uttering soundless words and gurgles. Alexander looked perfectly content, smiling as he held her hand.

"The Coverdale estate doesn't need any more territories, and the Knowles family is welcome to use our markets to sell their products."

"Wha— Wait—"

"I will need some help with the household. But if it doesn't interfere with that, you can read and study to your heart's content."

The way he spoke, Alexander sounded like he was simply asking her what she thought of his offer. But what he had just offered her was precisely what she had told him before, in their first practice in the music room—her ideal conditions in a marriage. Rosalind had boasted then that if these few conditions were met, she wouldn't care about anything else.

"You...have quite a good memory."

"I could never forget a single detail about the day I fell in love."

Rosalind exhaled so hard she was rendered speechless, her narrow eyes perfect circles.

"It was quite intense," Alexander continued, once again bringing her hand to his lips—this time, he kissed the back of her fingers. "I was immediately taken by your strength in how you wanted to pave your own way in life," he muttered.

Rosalind's cheeks flushed bright red at this.

"Plus, if you marry me, you won't have to cut ties with Amy when she becomes a royal. It wouldn't even be possible. Oh, and my mother's cats will be there, so Portia will be happy too."

"That's a very effective pick-up line you have there."

"Isn't it?"

Alexander's smile was full of confidence, and Rosalind found herself drawn in by it and smiled back at him. She looked out the window and saw Tigger begging for Amy to hold him and Amy bending down to pick him up.

The Earl and Countess of Northland joined them, and they all talked together as the four of them started to head back inside.

She caught a glimpse of Amy's face—her bashful smile was positively radiant.

"Lady Rosalind Knowles," said Alexander, applying light pressure to her hand.

Rosalind turned to face him again.

"I think I'd like an answer soon," he said.

"...I'll consider it."

"That's got to be a yes!"

"You really are a good person, Alec."

Alexander looked slightly deflated at this. Rosalind grinned.

No one but Alexander would leave the decision to the other party when they were high-ranking enough to give irrefutable orders. Well...that, and the thought of being rejected was probably unthinkable to him.

"I have to talk to my parents."

"Oh, I've already spoken with the Earl of Knowles. He told me I have his blessing, 'As long as she says yes.'"

"What? What do you mean? When did you do that?"

"It's only proper to get the parents' permission first."

"I can't believe this! You went all the way to Knowles?"

"I couldn't ask them to come all the way here. I was the one humbling myself, after all."

Rosalind wasn't listening. Something suddenly came to her mind... Was this the reason she had suddenly stopped getting letters from her parents trying to mediate between marriage partners?

The son of a duke, coming all the way out there from the royal capital... Rosalind put a hand against her forehead. She could only imagine the madhouse her home had turned into.

"I can't believe this..."

"Knowles is a great place. Peaceful, delicious food..."

"My family's cook makes the best kidney pie..."

"I asked him to serve some next month, too."

Not missing a beat, Rosalind's head snapped up.

"Alec, what do you mean 'next month'?"

"You want to eat some too, don't you? If we don't go together, I'll just go there on my own."

"Now wait—wait just a minute!"

She had managed to modulate her voice before the full-blown shout came out of her mouth. Rosalind thought she had caught it quite well, even if she did say so herself. If she drew any outside attention to this room, she really wouldn't know what to do with herself.

Alexander seemed to be thoroughly enjoying seeing Rosalind so worked up.

"Listen, if you won't take the reins, I will. Your partner can be anyone, right? Then let it be me."

Rosalind thought he drove quite a hard bargain, but despite

his teasing demeanor, there was a seriousness behind his eyes. Rosalind didn't know what to make of it.

She didn't know what to do, but she had to tell him this, at least.

"I want to talk about this a little bit. But in the meantime, please let me have a say if we're going off somewhere."

"Understood. Where do you want to go?"

As Alexander began asking if she wanted to go out to eat or go shopping, Rosalind tucked her own hand in the crook of his elbow.

"First...we're going to the first aid room. Getting out of this place is the first order of business."

Rosalind smiled up at Alexander, his eyes wide and his face blank. Then he broke out into a wide smile.

"You beat me."

"Oh? So this was all a game?"

"But that's all right," Alexander said boldly. "I'll spend the rest of my life winning!"

"Oh, would you give it a rest?!" she whined, blushing.

Alexander talked a big talk, but when push came to shove, he would always surrender to Rosalind.

Rosalind left the VIP room arm-in-arm with Alexander, surprised at herself by how natural it all seemed.

Chapter 10: Amy and the Heroine

TIGGER clung desperately to Amy, standing with his hind legs on the ground while tugging at her skirt with his front paws. He meowed loudly, pleading to be picked up, and at that same moment, Amy heard a fake cough from behind her.

“Er... Hm... Ahem!”

“Joshua, dear, please...”

Amy looked around, suddenly returning to her senses.

Her father Joshua looked as though he had eaten something distasteful and cleared his throat again, and her mother Isabelle looked embarrassed at her husband’s juvenile reaction. Her parents stood there, looking at Amy and Edward.

As were Kevin and everyone who had crowded around him...

What?! H-Hold on a second! W-We’re outside! Where am I? What am I doing?!

Her inner line of questioning instantly transformed into mortification. Amy felt herself turn so hot that steam must have surely been rising from her head. Tears sprung to her eyes—for an entirely different reason this time—and when she looked up in a panic, she saw Edward smiling down at her.

Th-That smile...!

The first time Amy had met Edward, something about his smile felt out of place, but there were no lingering shadows in his smile now... He just looked genuinely happy.

Amy instinctively hid her face in embarrassment, but then she realized she was hiding it against Edward’s chest and started going wild with panic all over again. A quiet chuckle came down from above. She was hopelessly embarrassed.

Kevin looked on sympathetically and, unless she was mishearing their remarks, she could hear the others saying kind things about her. It almost sounded as if they were saying she was cute when she turned red, but Amy also felt like they were peppering in cooing phrases that would be better suited for an animal or a stuffed toy, like “She’s so round!” or “She’s so small!” or

“She looks so soft!”

And then there was Joshua, petulantly trying to keep everyone in check with his fake coughs.

Amy realized that Edward was probably also very aware that everyone, including her own parents, was watching them, but his arms around her were as tight as ever.

“Um... Ed...” she said, flapping her hand restlessly.

“Hm? What is it?”

Keeping one arm around her waist, Edward gently put his other hand around her flapping one, keeping it still. Amy froze, paralyzed once more.

She had absolutely no experience with love in her previous life—she never even had a crush. That, paired with the fact that she’d never really been interested in romance novels or girly magazines, meant that she had absolutely no immunity to this sort of stuff.

Just as Amy was about to feel faint, she finally became cognizant of Tigger’s incessant meowing. Today, his tinkling voice sounded like the bells of salvation.

“I-I need to pick up Tigger...”

“Oh! Right.”

Edward slowly and regrettably let go of her hand and loosened his grip on her waist. Feeling a little shaky, Amy reached her hands out to Tigger.

Tigger jumped into her arms impatiently, assuming his typical position with his front paws on Amy’s shoulders. Purring happily, he enthusiastically rubbed his face against her cheeks.

“Th-Thanks for being so patient, Tigger.”

“You two are really close, huh?”

But as Edward stretched out his hand to pet Tigger, Tigger suddenly stiffened his front legs, twisting away from it, and froze, silently glaring at him.

The two quietly stared at one another.

At that moment, Amy almost felt the air between them snapping and popping. She never thought she would see the metaphor “sparks flying” so viscerally in real life.

The silent battle between them raged on for some time until it was broken by Tigger, who suddenly lost interest and started snuggling against Amy again. With nowhere for Edward’s outstretched hand to go, he changed gears and started petting Amy’s head.

“E-Ed?!”

“Well, it seems like Tigger won’t let me pet him, so...”

“S-Sorry about that... He’s shy.”

But Edward didn’t look disappointed at all, and Amy had no idea why he was petting her hair instead.

Meanwhile, Kevin ordered the peanut gallery to disperse, and her parents made their way over to them.

“That was an outstanding match, Your Highness.”

“Thank you very much, Director.”

“Incidentally, I think it’s about time you stepped away from my daughter.”

“Joshua! You’re perfectly fine as you are, Edward.”

“Isabelle...” Joshua grumbled.

Isabelle smiled at them, her eyes shining gleefully. Joshua stood beside her, frowning—almost comically—at his unsuccessful attempt at swaying his wife to his side.

Edward was not the least bit shaken, not even in front of her parents, and Amy sincerely wished that she could have just a fraction of his nerves of steel.

“But you must be exhausted, Your Highness,” Isabelle continued. “Why don’t we go back inside?”

“That sounds great.”

Edward finally stopped petting Amy’s head, and the four of them started heading back.

Amy, utterly incapable of looking up at anyone, pushed her face against Tigger and slowly walked with them, practically blind to everything in front of her.

“Even if my daughter says yes...” Joshua said suddenly, “don’t forget what I told you before.”

“Of course not,” said Edward.

“I’m so sorry, Your Highness,” sighed Isabelle. “I really appreciate you going along with a father’s long-held dream.”

“Isabelle!”

“He’s always dreamt of being put in a situation where he could say, ‘You can’t have my daughter!’ Isn’t that right, dear?”

Amy practically walked in a stupor, totally incapable of understanding the conversation going right over her head. She was just barely able to pick up on the pleasant, high-pitched laughter of her mother.

Then, just as they got back inside, Isabelle looked at Amy’s

face.

“Put Tigger down here, Amy. You look a little pale...”

As soon as she heard her mother’s concerned voice, Amy started to feel dizzy.

Edward was immediately there to prop her up at the first wobble, but all the strength seeped from her legs, and she collapsed to the ground with Tigger still in her arms.

“Amy?!” she heard a voice say.

“...Ah...”

It happened. This is...

Amy closed her eyes, unable to endure the flashing lights popping behind her eyelids. Her symptoms were similar to extremely low blood pressure. Amy knew the real cause at once, but she couldn’t physically say the words.

She heard people call her name over and over. She wrenched her heavy eyelids open and saw Edward, white as a sheet and panicked, right above her. Her heart sank painfully at having made him so worried.

As her father and Edward panicked on one side of her, her mother kneeled calmly at her other side, checking her vitals. After putting a hand against Amy’s cheek and forehead, Isabelle sighed, half-exasperated, half-relieved.

“You’ve exhausted your magic power, Amy.”

Amy groaned quietly and managed to nod as Isabelle took Tigger out of her arms. Once he knew the cause of Amy’s sudden collapse, Edward looked palpably relieved.

Thinking back over the last few hours, Amy remembered that she had run to the spectator’s room after healing Jahal, watched a fierce battle in constant anxiety with no time to properly rest, and then healed Edward’s injuries, too. And all that after a day of healing others.

None of the injuries had been that serious, but Amy had overexerted herself when she had overused her magic power on them.

Amy would typically feel hungry when her magic power was low, but she had been so nervous and on-edge for so long, she must not have noticed.

The remedy for magic exhaustion was either eating, sleeping, or doing both.

If Amy went to the first aid room, she could eat some cott nuts

to quickly replenish some of her magic power. If she ate plenty of them and rested, she probably could partially recover her strength before the final match was over.

But when Amy remembered how crazy things were in the first aid room, she felt crestfallen and guilty. She had been given a special break, and now she wouldn't even be able to help...

I'm really sorry, Professor Dion... Finn...

Edward listened earnestly when Amy explained that she'd be okay if she went to the first aid room for a little bit, and then he swooped down, picked her up, and started carrying her in his arms.

Wh-What?!

"All right. I'll take you to the first aid room, then."

"Um—I can—walk!"

"No can do. You collapsed because you healed me, right? I don't want to take any more chances."

With one hand looped under her knees and one around her back, Edward carried her in perfect "bridal style" fashion. Amy was a little frightened at being so high up in the air. She threw both arms around his neck and weakly clung to him.

Although the arm that had been injured held Amy up unwaveringly, Edward hadn't been able to rest since the match.

"I-I'm heavy!" she blurted out.

"That doesn't matter," he insisted.

With her entire body pressed against him, Amy could feel his solid frame, even under his protective gear, and her head started to spin even more.

"You don't have to do that, Your Highness," Joshua said grumpily. "I will carry my daughter."

"Director, this is an emergency!"

"Come now, dear! Edward's fine!"

Amy had no sense of reality. Her dizziness and sluggishness seemed to distort her hearing, and she heard the voices of her father and Edward talking to each other and her mother's giddy voice almost like they were coming through damaged speakers.

Her embarrassment, however, was alive and well, and at some point, as she hid her face against Edward's chest, they arrived at the first-aid station.

How many people passed us on the way here? How did Sir Dion and Finneas react when we arrived? Rosalind and Alexander are here... What are they going to say about all this later?

There were many things about the day Amy wanted wiped from her memory, but this athletic tournament was sure to be one she could never forget.



HAROLD'S team handily defeated the opponents in the final match and won the tournament.

The next morning, Jahal entered the exhibition competition on a whim, and he made the stadium erupt in thunderous applause with his stunning sword dance. The final day of the tournament came to a close with the whole tournament being a great success.

That night, a celebration would be held at the royal palace for the tournament winners and the event staff to celebrate their achievements and hard work.

Although Amy had taken part in the tournament as a healing magician, she still hadn't come of age or debuted in society yet, so she'd only planned on going for a short while, accompanied by her father.

But those plans were all thrown out when she collapsed from magic exhaustion the day before.

As Amy was a central figure in the treatment room, the civil officials were disappointed by her decision not to come to the party, but because so many people had seen her faint and be carried away, they couldn't exactly suspect her of faking an illness.

When Amy thought back to that day, she was troubled by the heat that rushed to her face, the creeping feeling on her back, and the restless feeling she couldn't shake.

The sun slowly set. If things had gone according to plan, Amy would probably be right in the middle of getting ready to go out. But instead of changing into party clothes, she was sitting in the living room drinking tea, relaxing for the first time in a long time.

"Weren't you excited about going, Amy?" Isabelle asked quietly, sneaking a quick look at Joshua, who was sitting across the room.

"No. I'm pretty relieved, actually," Amy responded with a puzzled look.

Amy had always been nervous about crowded places, so she didn't think the party sounded particularly fun.

It was a little disappointing that she couldn't properly thank the people she had worked with and all the guards that had been on duty, but she had asked Sir Dion to pass along the message for her, and she would be sending them all thank-you letters later.

Amy was wearing a relaxed, flowy, light-cream-colored day dress as she rested. Her long, black hair was also relaxed, only pinned up at the sides as it flowed down her back.

She was nestled on a wide sofa, a cup of tea in her hand, and Tigger, dozing off on her lap. Her half-read book lay on the table, along with plenty of snacks. She was fully enjoying her time relaxing as much as she wanted and eating as much as she pleased.

"Really? I was so sure there was a person there you wanted to see... Like maybe a guy who's decided to officially make you his fiancée..."

"Mom..."

Amy wanted a break from the teasing, but she knew that even if she glared at her mother, who was giggling away, her blushing face would negate the glare's intended effect.

But there was something Amy had been totally unaware of until recently...

Amy had been the only reason why Edward had kept her his fiancée *candidate* all this time.

I just can't believe I heard that conversation between Dad and Ed... That must have been about me, right?

Edward didn't want an engagement in name alone—he wanted Amy's heart. And Joshua wanted his daughter's freedom, happiness, and more time to be her father.

Neither would budge until Amy herself showed her intentions toward Edward.

Although it would have been nice to have known something about their agreement, Amy didn't blame either of them. It was clear that they both respected her feelings.

Amy bristled at her mother's laughter and looked away from her, sipping grumpily at her tea. Suddenly a noise came from the hallway and Tigger, who had dozed off, twitched his ears.

A half-second after they heard a perfunctory knock, the door opened, and an unexpected figure stepped into the room.

"Hey, Amy. I heard you collapsed. You feeling better? You look like you're doing okay."

"Harold!" Amy shouted. "What?! I thought you weren't coming

home until tomorrow! Also...why are you wearing that?"

Harold had slept at the guild house for his entire stay, and Amy had been so busy, they hadn't been in the same room the whole tournament. He'd said they would have a nice meal together once the tournament had ended.

As the winners of the team competition, Harold's team would surely be going to the party tonight. And yet, Harold was dressed head-to-toe in traveling gear.

But that wasn't the only surprise.

"Um...I'm sorry...to intrude like this."

A face suddenly popped out from behind Harold. It was the heroine—Yasmine.

"Oh, welcome!" cried Isabelle.

Amy, who had nearly dropped her teacup in surprise, hastily returned it to the table and stood up, blinking rapidly.

Joshua welcomed Yasmine as warmly as his wife had done and then looked at his son suspiciously.

"Harold... Surely you aren't going to the royal palace dressed like that?"

"I'm not! The guild got word that a pretty massive magical beast appeared near Salaiza. We're going there, not the palace."

"What?"

"Gil and Nick said palace parties are a pain anyway, so it's fine. Sorry to say, but you'll have to go in my place, Pops."

"Pardon?"

"It'll be okay—just say a few words to His Majesty. And make sure to get the prize money! Then you can send it to me through the guild."

Joshua's mouth popped open.

"Harold... Come with me for a moment."

Then, with a deep scowl, Joshua grabbed Harold's arm none too gently and pulled him out of the room.

Amy watched them leave, her mouth open in shock. Yasmine looked panicked. Isabelle stood up and smiled apologetically.

"I suppose I have no choice, do I? I'm going out there, too. Your father can get long-winded when his blood's boiling. Amy, why don't you fix Yasmine some tea?"

"Oh! S-Sure."

"Make yourself at home, Yasmine."

Then Isabelle left the room, too, leaving only Amy, Tigger, and

Yasmine behind.

“Um... Please, take a seat.”

“S-Sure! Thank you very much!”

As soon as Yasmine sat on the sofa, she twitched into a perfect, upright sitting posture and froze.

When the Northlands spent time together as a family in the living room, they didn't have any servants stationed there. As Amy tilted the teapot over the cups with clumsy hands, she surreptitiously glanced at Yasmine.

Yasmine was wearing adventurers' traveling clothes just like Harold. She took off her hooded robe, the same one she wore during the tournament, and set it aside. Today her beautiful pink blonde hair was not in a ponytail but braided to the side.

There were so many things Amy wanted to ask her, but now that she had the chance, she just felt disoriented. Plus, Amy had done nothing but relax the entire day. She didn't feel nearly mentally prepared enough to deal with this unexpected turn of events.

It's not like I can just come out and ask her, "Are you the heroine?"

In the otome game Amy played, the main character's avatar was customizable, so there was no preset heroine she could compare Yasmine's appearance to. Amy's prediction that Yasmine was the heroine was purely based off her intuition and past experience reading books about such things.

Not to mention, concepts like “previous lives” and “reincarnation” were generally not known, even in this world of magic. They were known, at best, as terms used by certain fortunetellers.

If Amy came out and told Yasmine, “I have memories of my previous life,” she wouldn't want to have anything to do with her.

“Do you like tea?” Amy asked.

“Y-Yes, I like it! Thank you very much! Thank you!”

As Amy pondered internally over what to do, she put the cup on the table as Yasmine continued thanking her profusely.

Amy was shy herself and knew exactly how nerve-racking it was to meet someone for the first time, so she felt a sort of kinship with Yasmine.

Yasmine awkwardly drank her tea, her cheeks bright pink. Amy had been so frightened to meet the heroine, but she actually

found her to be rather charming.

Yasmine doesn't seem scary...

She was taller than Amy and quite beautiful. Yasmine looked older, but now that Amy was seeing her up close, she thought they were around the same age.

After taking a few sips of tea, Yasmine gently returned the cup to the saucer on the table and squeezed her hands together on her lap. She took a deep breath, as if she were steeling herself to do something, and looked straight at Amy across the table.

Amy's heart thudded loudly when their eyes met.

"U-Um... Lady Amy..."

"Y-Yes?"

"Do you know—remember—me? Not me, but, I mean... Yasmine?"

"...What?" Amy asked, bewildered by the unexpected question.

Yasmine was the name of Harold's gaming buddy from their past lives... But she can't be referring to that, can she?

Seeing Amy's expression, Yasmine frantically waved both hands and hurried to explain.

"I-I'm so sorry! It doesn't make any sense when I say it like that, does it? Um... You've been reincarnated too, haven't you, Lady Amy?"

"Wha—?"

"I have, too!"

Wh-What did she just say?!

Amy was frozen in shock. Yasmine took a deep breath and steadily held Amy's gaze.

"My name is Maria Clifford," Yasmine explained in a rush. "My name *before* was Marika Hayase. In my past life, I would play video games using the name 'Yasumi.' I'm the same 'Yasmine' that used to play video games with your older brother."

Amy's eyes widened so much she was afraid they might pop out.

"The same...?"

"Yes. Oh! But please don't call me by my real name, Maria—just call me Yasmine!"

Perhaps she felt better after getting that off her chest, because Maria—Yasmine—looked relieved and started to speak in a more chipper voice.

Amy blinked in silence, ruminating over what she had just heard.

‘Yasmine’ from their previous lives...

“Um... You’re the same Yasmine with the cat-girl avatar and the highest-ranked gear?”

“Yes, that’s me.”

“Whose unmatched playstyle of rapid-fire support skills would put pros to shame?”

“I-I don’t know if...I’d go *that* far...”

“Aren’t you the heroine?!”

“The heroine?”

Yasmine tilted her head, still covering her cheeks with both hands to hide her pink blush at Amy’s praise.

There she is being adorable again! Just like a heroine!

Amy had gotten distracted, but she reconsidered and thought it would be better to hear out Yasmine’s story first. She glossed over the outburst with a small cough.

“Um... Ahem... It’s nothing. I-I had just assumed that Harold played with a guy, and that Yasumi was the guy’s name or something, so I was just surprised.”

That hadn’t been the only thing I had been surprised by, but...

Yasmine laughed a little uncomfortably.

“Well, my former name, Marika, was written using the same characters for the word ‘jasmine’ in Japanese, and ‘Yasmine’ is a variation of the name ‘Jasmine,’ so I just used the opportunity to obscure my gender by using the name ‘Yasumi’... That way I could just focus on playing the game.”

“Ah... I see.”

Even Amy had heard about people that would harass solo female players in video games. Pretending to be a boy was probably an effective way of avoiding the harassment.

“I never thought I’d go back to that flower and be called ‘Yasmine’ again, though,” she said, blushing again and giggling.

Amy watched her, vaguely remembering that ‘Yasmine’ was the Persian word for ‘Jasmine,’ when suddenly she recalled a very distant memory of a princess from a fairy tale named Jasmine... Amy must have seen the Hollywood animated version of the flying-carpet adventure at least once in her past life.

“I’m so happy... You really do remember me! Hal told me that I should talk to you because you’d definitely remember me, so

today we...”

Yasmine suddenly stopped and tears spilled from her emerald-green eyes. Amy quickly scooped up Tigger and went to sit next to Yasmine, offering up her handkerchief.

“I-I’m sorry for crying like this...”

“It’s fine!”

“It’s just...I was always cooped up in hospitals in my past life.”

“Really...?”

“My body had been frail, ever since I was born... But I could play video games even just sitting in bed, so I played them whenever I felt up to it. I didn’t have any friends either, so...for you to remember me... I’m so happy.”

Yasmine certainly had the cards stacked against her in her past life... Perhaps she finally felt comfortable enough to speak about the difficulties she faced now that she had crossed over into another world and so much time had passed.

Yasmine sniffled quietly, and when she looked up, she wasn’t crying anymore.

She looked not at Amy, but at the front window that was bathed in the glow of the setting sun. Amy admired her profile as Yasmine continued to reminisce about her past, clutching Amy’s handkerchief in her lap.

“It was so much fun. I could barely walk in real life, but in the game, I could run, jump, and even kill monsters.”

“That does sound fun.”

“I started playing online, too, but no one played with me because I was never on for very long at a time—and because of my avatar.”

The cat-girl avatar was cute, but many of their abilities were capped at a lower level than the fully human avatars. They were seen as handicaps in terms of fighting power, so they were rarely chosen by co-op players in particularly difficult areas.

I think Harold mentioned that he had been even more surprised at her skill because of that... Amy realized as she probed her own hazy memories.

“But you didn’t want to change your avatar, right?” said Amy, urging Yasmine to continue.

“Well—no! It was cute!”

Amy laughed.

“Totally understandable!”

The two girls laughed together, their attempts at maintaining aristocratic formality quickly vanishing.

“Hal was the first person who played with me without judging me based on my avatar. He called me ‘Yasmine’ like we were old friends, and we had so much fun... I always wished that our video game world was real... Not that I think I was reincarnated because of that, though,” Yasmine added.

She went on to detail her life so far as Maria Clifford.

Maria was born fatherless, and her mother died when she was a very young child. After that, she was raised by her grandfather living in Wallum. She had remembered the memories from her previous life a little sooner than Amy had, when she was just nine years old.

She couldn’t believe her eyes when she saw Harold and his twin blades during the kraken hunt—he fought just like the ‘Hal’ from her memories.

When Maria’s grandfather died, an aristocrat suddenly visited her, claiming to be a relative of her father. Just when the man was about to forcefully take her away, Maria suddenly discovered her magical power.

Maria escaped, and along the way, she met an adventurer magician. She asked them to teach her about magic, and that was how she became a hunter.

Her teacher acted as her guardian and looked after her throughout the rest of her childhood, but she had become totally independent since coming of age this year. Almost immediately after, she met Harold’s party and Harold invited her to join them as a permanent member.

“What?! You’re already of age?”

“Yes.”

Amy would be coming of age on her next birthday, but that was still some time away. After some probing, Amy learned that Yasmine’s birthday was much earlier than hers. Although they would have been in the same year academically, they were almost a year apart in age.

Now it made sense why Yasmine seemed so mature compared to Amy.

Be that as it may, Yasmine *was* the illegitimate child of an aristocrat and was born with high magic power—she fit the heroine template for otome-game-themed novels perfectly... But she didn’t

even seem to be aware of it.

On the other hand, since Yasmine had regained her past life memories and awakened to her magic power, she seemed more focused on finding out how to recreate the playstyle of her monster-hunting video game. Although she may have looked like a heroine, deep down, she was probably more like Harold.

From what Amy had heard, Yasmine seemed to hold Harold in quite high regard—both in this life and the last.

“I heard that Hal had become an adventurer, so I thought that if I honed my skills, we could hunt monsters together again, just like we did in our past life.”

“I see... Um... May I ask you a question, Yasmine? Uh... Are you...dating my brother?”

“Huh?! Wh-What— Why would you— What?!”

“I was just wondering if you guys were boyfriend and girlfriend.”

A wave of red flooded Yasmine’s face up to the rim of her eyes, and she frantically shook her head and both hands all at once.

“B-B-Boyfriend and girlfriend— D-Dating?! No, I-I just want to catch up to Hal’s level!”

“It just seems like you guys are together a lot, and I heard he was pretty pushy when he tried to persuade you to join his party...”

“Th-That was just because I...I wasn’t confident my abilities would be up to his party’s level...”

“Even though you can do all that stuff?!” Amy asked, remembering Yasmine’s illusions from the tournament. She couldn’t believe her ears. “That’s impossible!”

Yasmine shook her head again.

“My skills are nothing compared with what I could do in the game, but Hal told me it was fine... I never thought we’d be able to play—I mean, hunt together again, so all I can do right now is try to improve my skills.”

What am I going to do?! Such a courageous, hard-working girl, saddled with taking care of Harold... I’m so, so sorry, Yasmine!

Amy had been slightly off the mark with her dating assumption. Right now, at least, Yasmine and Harold seemed bound by comradeship more than anything else.

Amy felt so guilty that Yasmine was at her slightly feckless, free-spirited brother’s beck and call, she blurted out: “I’m really sorry for any trouble Harold has caused...”

“No, not at all! I’m actually the one dragging him down! I can’t even break rocks.”

“You don’t have to break any rocks!”

“And the recovery potion I’m developing is the worst tasting thing in the world... It’s got such a bad reputation, people say it restores your strength but zaps away your willpower to go on.”

“What on earth does it taste like?! Wait—recovery potions exist? I’ve never seen one!”

“Well...that’s still a trade secret!” Yasmine boasted excitedly, bursting into giggles.

Then, suddenly, she started crying again.

As Amy flew into a confused panic, Yasmine chuckled softly with watery eyes.

“I’ve always...wanted to talk to somebody like this... I’m just so beside myself with happiness... I’m sorry for crying again.”

When her tears subsided somewhat, Yasmine eventually explained that for a while after she had remembered her previous life, she had been so confused and affected by her memories that she ended up alienating the friends she had made in this world.

“I was so happy that I could move around freely because I hadn’t been able to exercise or anything like that in my past life. But then I remembered it hadn’t just been my mind that was sick, but my entire body... After remembering that, even though nothing was wrong with me, I got a fever, my body started to hurt all over, and I suddenly couldn’t eat... For six months, I couldn’t even sit up properly.”

“That must have been awful...”

“It’s not that I didn’t know what triggered it—I just couldn’t tell anyone about it. Even after I felt better, everyone was so afraid I’d get that weird illness again or suddenly collapse, so it was hard for me to readjust to this world. So instead, I just distanced myself from everything and everyone... Only Grandpa loved me unconditionally, but I couldn’t even tell him about my previous life.”

Yasmine assured her the root of her self-isolation had more to do with her own issues, not so much the people around her, but Amy couldn’t help flashing back to her own experience.

Amy had managed to accept the memories of her previous life because her family, who had gone through the same thing, had been by her side.

It must have been so hard to come to grips with that all by herself, and at such a young age...

Yasmine continued that while she was readjusting to this world with her new memories, she learned about a dual-wielding student named *Harold*, who would be one of the students coming from the Royal Academy to study in Wallum.

"I had...maybe you would call it a premonition. I had a strange feeling, so I went to watch the students arriving. That day became a turning point in my life. I hadn't even known what Harold looked like in my previous life, and I had no proof that he had been reborn, but when I saw him, I immediately thought—*that's him!* My heart pounded so hard against my chest, and I ran away before he could see me."

It sounded like how Amy had instinctively assumed, without any proof, that that girl watching them that day was the heroine.

"That was the first day I saw you," Amy confessed.

"Really? Not the day the kraken appeared? I was so nervous... I mean, aristocrats from the royal capital... You guys are on another level entirely!"

"No way!"

"Really! Isabelle is as beautiful as a lead actress, and you... well...you're a little chubby, but..."

Amy smiled forgivingly as Yasmine chose her words judiciously.

"You don't have to find something to say."

"No, that's not it! It's just...your aura, you know? It's so different from everyone else! And I was so surprised by your cat, too!"

"Tigger?"

Even though he was a quiet, gentle cat, Tigger's size would surprise anyone.

"You two walked along the beach a lot when you were in Wallum, right? I saw you there a few times. I remember thinking about how cute you guys were...how close a bond you must have with Tigger...and how different you were from the other ladies from the royal capital."

For a moment, Amy wished that Yasmine would have called out to her back then.

But if Yasmine had actually said something, would Amy, then still fearful of her, have been able to respond?

Amy was able to laugh with Yasmine now because of how far she'd come, but back then, when Amy was still suspicious of everything, she would have simply run away from her.

I guess there's a right time for everything. Maybe working through all those painful emotions was necessary, too...

"Oh, I'm sorry, I've only been talking about myself!" said Yasmine.

She prompted Amy to talk about something, but Harold and her parents were sure to be back at any minute and, judging from their outfits, Yasmine and Harold would be heading out right after. Amy didn't have much time left.

After a moment's hesitation, Amy took the plunge to finally set her mind at ease.

"So...in your previous life, did you ever like girly romance video games or web novels, or anything like that?"

"Oh! No, sorry... I only liked action and fighting video games. I was never interested in romance games."

"Oh! I-I see."

"I was never a very strong reader," Yasmine continued, laughing. There wasn't anything in her manner that raised Amy's suspicions.

Amy was sure Yasmine was telling the truth. From what she'd seen of Yasmine, she was the last person Amy could imagine playing otome games or reading novels about them.

"But..." Yasmine added, suddenly remembering something, "all this talk of video games reminds me of a game I played that really resembled the world we're in now... Of course, we have magical beasts here, not monsters, and the weapons and equipment in this world are different, too. But how the world looks and feels is kind of similar, somehow... Oh! And I was shocked when I realized the geography and kingdom names were nearly the same, too."

"How the world looks and feels..."

Amy was convinced that not everyone had reincarnated like she did—only specific people.

And if so, she began to wonder, could this game be a mixture of video games that we played...?

But Amy sharply came back to her senses.

It's not right for me to link everything back to the previous world or video games. Doesn't that just make me a prisoner to my own thoughts? It's like living with horse blinders on to the past, unnaturally living in

two worlds at once.

And perhaps the fact that this awareness sprung up in Amy as naturally as a surge of spring water was proof that she had finally been able to break free from the binds of her “reincarnation game” thought patterns.

And she felt like this truly started changing for her...yesterday, when she finally opened her heart to Edward.

Let's talk about something totally different from video games!

Let's see... She's a girl around my age... We were both reincarnated...

Having finally met Yasmine after so long, there must be other things Amy could talk to her about.

That's right!

Tigger was sitting on Amy's lap. She started petting him.

With his gold eyes squinting contentedly, he rubbed his own paw against his head in an adorable motion.

“I had allergies in my previous life, so I wasn't able to have any pets,” Amy said. “When I found out I had been reborn, the first thing I wanted to do was adopt animals—but I wanted a cat to start out with.”

Yasmine's eyes widened when Amy told her about how her father's condition for letting Amy get a cat was that she learn magic.

Yasmine had struggled to get a handle on her own magical power when it had suddenly manifested. Much like Amy, she had frequently worked herself too hard during her magic training.

Using healing magic consumed a lot of magic power and was also very difficult to control. Yasmine, who had learned the basics of it for her position as a support, fully appreciated how high-level Amy's healing magic was.

“That's amazing!” said Yasmine. “So both of our dreams have come true, huh?”

“No. You and I...we *made* our dreams come true!”

“Huh... You're right! I wanted to be an adventurer, and I worked really hard for it.”

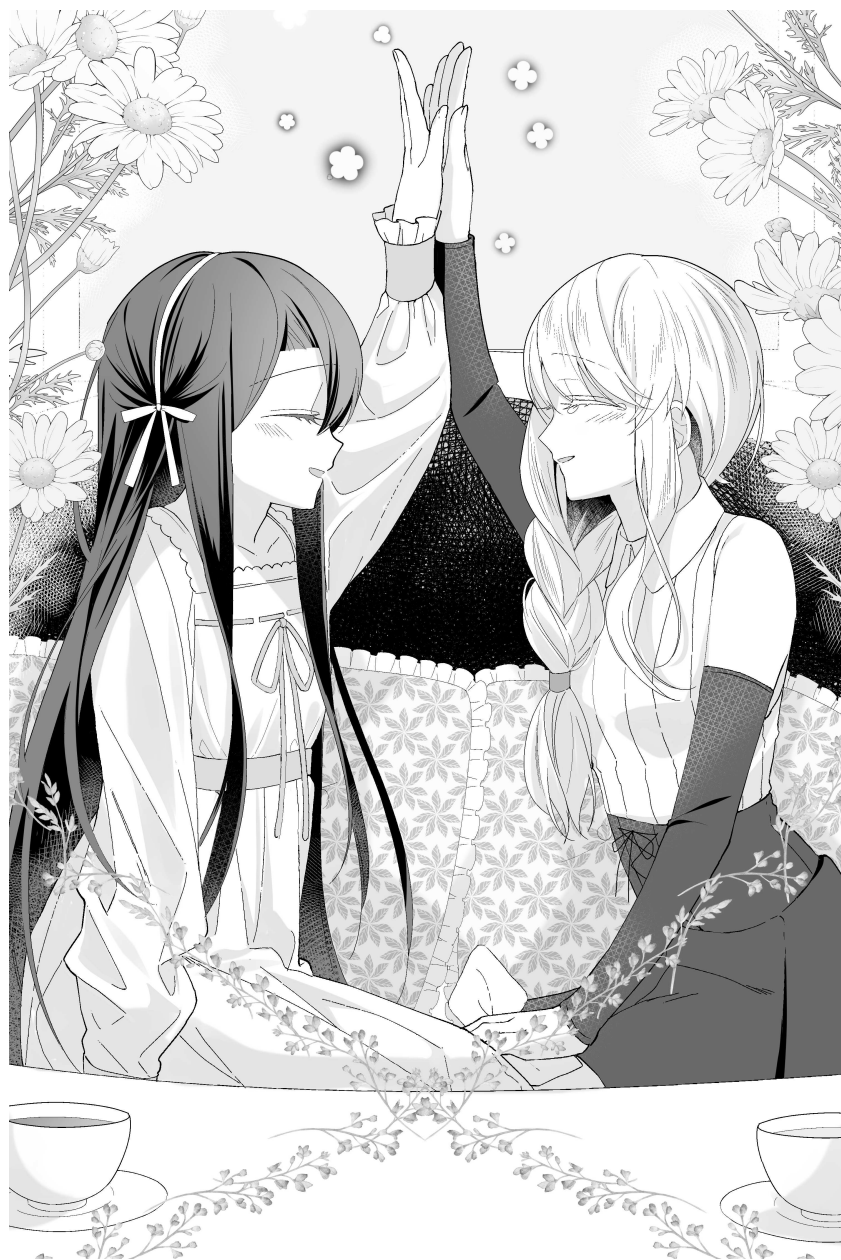
“Exactly! I've put a lot of work in, too!”

“Right!”

Amy and Yasmine laughed, lifting their hands into the air in celebration.

The sounds of hands high fiving each other and the twinkling

of laughter echoed throughout the Northland family's living room.



Chapter 11: The Celebration at the Royal Palace

THE castle banquet hall was bustling with people, illuminated by opulent chandeliers. But this was different from your average party—there were many rough-looking men among the invitees and almost no ladies adorned in brilliant dresses.

Even the food and beverage options were unusual, mostly hearty foods and strong liquors. The guests ravenously consumed them, and the servers rushed back and forth to bring in even more plates of food.

Although there were guards stationed throughout the room, the guests were nearly all as muscular and strong, so much so that without the guard uniforms, it would have been hard to differentiate the invited guests from the security detail.

This was the customary triennial post-tournament celebration.

Prince Edward, attending as one of the tournament participants, was out on the floor instead of with the noble visitors seated in the back.

Kevin had almost immediately been dragged away by one of his friends, so Edward was alone with Alexander. Both dressed in formal wear, they slowly made their way through the hall, briefly conversing with the other guests as they went.

Edward's gray eyes, much calmer than they were during his match, widened slightly when they landed on someone who wasn't supposed to be there.

"Director!"

Alexander followed Edward's gaze.

"Is that Earl Northland?" Alexander asked, sounding just as surprised.

Earl Joshua Northland was standing there talking to a nobleman he seemed to know, a deep line clearly visible between his eyebrows.

But the only two people from the Northland family who were qualified to come to the party were Harold, the winner of the

tournament, and Amy, who had worked as a member of the medical staff. It would make sense if he were here as Amy's escort, but Amy had sent word that she wouldn't be attending the party tonight...

Edward quickly looked around, but he couldn't see Amy anywhere. Now that he thought of it, he hadn't seen Harold or his team members yet, either.

Many nobles came to the party to offer tournament participants contracts of employment, but it didn't seem like the Northland family needed hired muscle.

Edward and Alexander exchanged glances and started walking toward Joshua.

The earl noticed them heading over and, after a few parting words with the man he had been speaking to, walked up to meet them halfway.

"Good evening, Director."

"Nice night tonight, isn't it, Your Highness?"

"Your face seems to contradict your words..."

"Oh, don't worry about me. I'm just being forced to clean up my man-child idiot son's messes, is all—"

"Is something wrong with Hal?" Alec asked impatiently, his long-held admiration for Harold burning as strong as ever. "I haven't seen him around yet. I was wondering if he got sick or something."

Joshua smiled, but it looked strained.

"No, nothing's wrong with him—just the opposite, actually. Even though he had this celebration to go to, he ran straight off to go fight more monsters. He's already left the capital," Joshua said with a sigh.

"I see," said Edward, nodding sympathetically.

Only working adventurers who didn't need political patronage could prioritize hunting over socializing. In reality, however, not many adventurers could throw away the opportunity to have an audience with the king.

Harold Northland was the only adventurer alive who could casually win a tournament and then leave prematurely. Admiration stirred in Alexander again as he thought, *That's Hal for you!*

"All his party members went with him, so it was up to me to come here and explain the situation. His Majesty generously forgave him, but this whole situation is such a headache..."

Joshua rubbed at the line on his forehead, but underneath the

grumpy exterior, Edward could see a hint of the pride Joshua had for his son and the love they shared as a family.

"I've already said my hellos to all my acquaintances, so I was just about to head out," Joshua continued. "I think I'll stop by the lab for a bit before I head home, though."

"Shall I join you?"

"Hold it, Ed," Alec protested. "I totally get that this party's boring, but you can't just leave me here on my own!"

"Do you want to come too, Alec?" asked Edward

"Do you really think I could understand the math or engineering behind such complicated magical tools?"

Joshua's expression finally softened, and they all laughed together, until suddenly a voice rang out—

"Earl Northland."

Suddenly Jahal was right behind Joshua, dressed in white from head to toe in the traditional clothing of the Kingdom of Bakr.

His two team members stood beside him, and the three of them together made quite an impressive sight. Due to Jahal's elite status as a foreign prince, the people around them naturally stepped back, surrounding them from a distance as they watched the scene unfold.

"Jahal, where have you been? And Letty's not with you, either."

"I just got here, Alec. And I would've brought her if this were a ball, but I wouldn't bring her to a party with so many men like this. I heard Amy wasn't coming, either."

"I suppose that's one way of doing things," Alec said. "So, what do you want with the earl?"

Joshua didn't know Jahal's reasons for singling him out, but he was still a royal from a neighboring kingdom, and there was protocol he had to follow. Joshua went to bow to him, but Jahal took a step closer, preventing him from doing so.

"We don't need any formalities between us."

"My apologies, Your Highness."

"I'll get straight to the point, Earl Northland. I'd like to keep your daughter in the Kingdom of Bakr."

As soon as the words left his mouth, Joshua and Edward's expressions froze.

Jahal had just dropped a bombshell, but his cadence and expression remained—as ever—lighthearted and unconcerned.

"I didn't just come to Luducia to study. I also came to find outstandingly talented individuals. Lady Amy's healing magic is a cut above the rest, and I'd like for her to train the healers in Bakr. That's right...the length of stay...what do you think about anywhere from a few years to a *lifetime*?"

"Hey!" Alec said immediately. "What in the world are you—"

"Your input is unnecessary, Alec. Besides, Amy would be the perfect companion for Letizia."

Jahal spoke unapologetically, but while Edward didn't think he was lying, he didn't seem to be telling the whole truth, either. Edward watched Jahal closely, trying to find any hint to his true motive.

"I know this proposal is sudden," Jahal continued. "I promise she will be treated well. If at all possible, I would even like to invite you as well, Earl, the authority on magical tools."

"Jahal..." Ed started.

"I'm just exerting the rights allowed to me, Ed."

Jahal may have been a foreign exchange student, but he was also an honored guest from an allied kingdom. Edward was well aware that diplomacy would crop up at some point during Jahal's stay in Luducia.

But what Jahal was asking for was not some official diplomatic bargaining chip.

"She's my fiancée—"

"*Candidate*, right? Would you risk our countries' diplomatic relations over the daughter of an earl?"

Edward gasped, speechless in indignation.

"Her healing magic is not the sort of thing Luducia should have sole ownership of," Jahal muttered so quietly Edward had to strain his ears to hear it.

Edward narrowed his eyes.

Did Jahal notice?

Amy's healing magic was not normal.

That fact had been camouflaged so far because she usually only treated animals and had so few opportunities to treat severely wounded humans.

Edward had no definitive proof of this, of course. He had thought Amy healing him after his match was a reconfirmation of his theory that she was a Protector, but doubts lingered in him even now.

Jahal wasn't spectacular at using magic, but he *did* have eyes. And Amy had healed him after his match at the tournament, too...

Jahal probably wasn't entirely convinced, either, but his interest seemed piqued enough to want to keep her under his eye in Bakr. It was only natural for royalty to act for the benefit of their own kingdoms, so Edward could understand why Jahal felt he had to do this.

But...

I won't hand her over—to the Kingdom of Bakr, or anyone else!

Edward had finally captured a piece of her heart, and he had no plans on letting it go.

A Protector was regarded as a higher status than the royal family, but they were like caged birds, placed under strict control. Separated from the world, their actions were severely restricted. It would be very difficult for Amy to see her beloved animals, and helping veterinarians would simply be out of the question.

Edward could never imagine Amy wanting a life like that.

As royalty, Jahal's words were orders, even if they were framed like requests. The only one present who could refuse Jahal was Edward.

But even if he and Amy had taken a step forward in their relationship, they hadn't become officially engaged yet, so Edward had no legal right to speak on Amy's behalf.

The only one who had those rights were Joshua, but he was just an earl—he couldn't refuse a royal request.

*Jahal **will** back down, even if we can't end this amicably.*

But which card should I play...?

In a split second, Edward turned to Jahal, opened his mouth to speak, and then felt a hand press against his shoulder.

Joshua took a half step forward, as if reining Edward in.

"Prince Jahal, thank you very much for speaking so highly of my daughter. But to be frank with you, it would be quite difficult for Amy to go to Bakr, for you see...Amy and His Highness Edward are to be engaged."

Joshua spoke at a nearly indistinguishable volume, but he said the words "are to be engaged" very loudly and clearly. Everyone who overheard him immediately turned their attention toward the group.

"I hadn't heard that," said Jahal.

"It was only just decided," replied Joshua. "We haven't made

an official announcement yet, but we shall have an engagement ceremony as soon as preparations are completed.”

In the middle of the sudden chaos around them as onlookers reacted to the news that the Third Prince had decided on his fiancée, Edward just managed to conceal his own surprise.

In accordance with the official formalities of getting engaged, Edward’s final step would have been securing permission from Amy’s father. That would have been easy enough if Edward forced it using his royal authority, but he hadn’t wanted to do that. Isabelle had warned him in advance that it would probably take more than one try.

Edward knew about this and had been prepared to try several times, but not once had he ever imagined Joshua would step up and proclaim his approval first.

It was incredibly uncharacteristic—unless Joshua, like Edward, had felt the same unease about Jahal’s request and grew concerned for Amy. This was undoubtedly the best response they could have hoped for, as it politely rejected Jahal’s request without publicly humiliating him.

“If you still insist that she go to Bakr,” Joshua continued, “I would ask that you discuss that with Amy herself—and His Highness, of course.”

Joshua’s black hair—the same shade as Amy’s—rustled slightly as he turned to look at Edward. Edward met Joshua’s measured gaze head-on.

“Hm... I didn’t see that coming,” said Jahal. His dark eyes smiled as he slowly turned to Edward.

“I can’t exactly bring the future wife of the Third Prince back with me to Bakr, can I? You should have told me that you decided to make it official, Ed.”

“He tried, but *you* interrupted him,” Alec interjected.

Ignoring Alec completely, Jahal extended his right hand to Edward.

“I withdraw my request. Congratulations on your engagement, Ed... That’s right! You guys can still come to Bakr for fun, right?”

“Of course.”

“Then you two have to come to Bakr for your first official tour! Let’s shake on it.”

They briefly squeezed and then let go of each other’s hands. Then, looking satisfied, Jahal swiftly turned his back to them and,

along with his two countrymen, left just as abruptly as he had arrived.

The moment he vanished from sight, the onlookers that had surrounded the group came surging toward them, clamoring to congratulate Edward or ask about what had just happened.

"I'll take care of things here," Alec muttered out of the corner of his mouth. "Just get out of here."

"You're a lifesaver, Alec."

With Alec distracting everyone, Edward and Joshua broke away from the group.

Weaving through crowds of partygoers, the two men ducked out to the balcony, miraculously devoid of people. Edward took a deep breath of the invigorating nighttime breeze.

Edward and Joshua gently leaned against the guardrail. He was the first to break the silence.

"Director... About what just happened..."

"All I did was respect my daughter's wishes. Regardless of what I said just now, the engagement ceremony will have to wait until Amy comes of age," Joshua started laying out the terms in a monotone, matter-of-fact voice. "Also, make note of the fact that if I decide you cannot keep my daughter safe, not only will your engagement be dissolved, but we will take her and disappear from this place entirely."

Edward nodded gravely. Joshua's voice sounded much the same as it always did, but Edward could tell that he spoke very seriously and with a heavy heart.

The Earl of Northland that Edward knew was a man who poured his heart and soul into his magical tool research, but he was also a man who would do absolutely anything for his family without even flinching.

"I'll keep that in mind."

"Please do."

"You know...this was the first time the circumstances of my birth have been helpful."

All Edward wanted was to keep Amy from being a Protector.

He had always felt confined and restricted as a member of the royal family, but if he could use that position as a shield to protect Amy with, he would use it until there was nothing left.

But there was something else...

"Actually, I was kind of looking forward to you turning me

away over and over,” Edward confessed.

“I was, too. You have good friends, Your Highness. That boy certainly threw a wrench in my plans,” Joshua said with a sigh.

In the end, Edward got everything he wanted without even lifting a finger.

Edward had no idea how far Jahal had thought ahead before he had started the scene, but he suddenly came to the realization that Jahal had probably chosen that time and place because he would’ve been pleased with either outcome it afforded—Amy going to Bakr or her engagement with Edward becoming official.

“Oh, also...” said Joshua, “Amy wants you to tell her when you’re free, because she has something she wants to talk to you about.”

“Amy?”

“I’m not exactly impressed with her using her father as a messenger bird myself, but I have conveyed the message.”

They frequently exchanged letters, but Amy had never told him that she wanted to see him—or talk to him—before. Edward nodded, unable to hide his surprise or excitement.

“Well then, if you’ll excuse me...” Joshua said as he started to walk away.

“Director!” Edward called out.

Joshua stopped and stood up a little straighter.

This might not have been the time or place he had imagined asking the question, but he had to say it.

“Director... No, Earl Northland... I wanted to formally ask... may I have your daughter’s hand in marriage?”

Edward stared ahead at the other man, gently clenching his slightly trembling fingers reflexively. It was the most nervous Edward had felt in his entire life.

Joshua’s eyes widened in surprise, and after a few moments of silence, he quietly sighed.

“It would just be lame if I gave you my permission after I already approved of the engagement, don’t you think? Then I’ll take the liberty of saying the alternative just this once... You can’t have my daughter!”

Joshua smiled, looking satisfied with himself. Edward smiled back in relief.

After Joshua left, Edward stood on the balcony, taking in deep breaths as the tension left his body and the bright moon climbed

higher and higher into the night sky.



LAST night, Joshua had gone to the celebration at the royal palace in place of Harold, and he had come home very late—and very drunk.

He seemed to have taken the opportunity of going out to the party to stop by his lab, but Amy didn't really understand why he got that drunk. Her father didn't usually like alcohol, which made her wonder if something happened last night that compelled him to drink.

Joshua woke up with such a massive hangover that he took the day off work and was resting at home. Isabelle spent the morning relentlessly teasing him, looking exasperated by his stunt. The Royal Academy was closed that day, so Amy was home too.

"You'll really be okay without my healing magic?" Amy asked her father sympathetically.

"...I'll be okay."

"It's fine, Amy. This hangover is simply your father's reward for enjoying himself so much."

What on earth is enjoyable about this?!

Amy didn't really know if healing magic would work on a hangover, but when she offered it, Isabelle had chirpily told her, "That's a question for your father," before lapsing into moody silence. When Joshua himself said he didn't need it, Amy had no choice but to drop the subject.

Amy thought he might be more comfortable lying down on his bed, but Joshua said he had gotten tired of it and had instead flopped down, pale-faced, on the living room sofa.

As he lay like that, Joshua curled a finger to beckon Amy over to him.

"...I gave His Highness your message."

"Oh! Th-Thank you."

Amy felt a little strange, despite being the one who asked him to deliver the message. Her heartbeat sped up; her face grew warm... She felt shy.

Isabelle was smiling, watching them out of the corner of her eye. Amy looked away from her and addressed Tigger, standing at

her feet.

“Tigger—uh—it’s been a while since we played in the garden. Why don’t we go do that?”

Amy wasn’t sure whether he understood what she said or was just happy that she was talking to him, but he looked up at her with sparkling eyes. Taking his hopeful eyes as a sign of agreement, Amy promptly left the living room and went out to the garden.

She had been so busy with the athletic tournament that she had barely been able to spend any time with Tigger recently. In what seemed like an attempt to make up for lost time, he had been glued to her side since yesterday, but he probably wanted to stretch his legs.

The weather was wonderful outside—a brilliantly clear sky without any wind. Amy realized too late that she had forgotten her hat, but she carried on without it. She was so caught up in her buoyant feelings, she felt practically weightless.

“Tigger, let’s race! Ready, set... GO!”

Without any passing thought for how dirty the bottom of her dress was about to get, Amy shot off in a sprint. Tigger followed behind at a jog, his perky tail upright.

They initially ran together side-by-side, with Tigger throwing her side-eyed glances as he ran, but gradually, Tigger seemed to start enjoying himself.

He quickened his pace and overtook Amy, even intermittently jumping from side to side as he ran. Amy was entranced by how graceful and agile his large body moved.

He’s so fast! You really are the best at everything, Tigger!

Amy was completely left in the dust and already out of breath, but Tigger kept charging forward.

He must have really wanted to play... Amy thought guiltily as she arrived at the garden in last place.

Tigger had arrived some time before and was in the middle of chasing after a butterfly. As the butterfly nimbly fluttered around, Amy saw a beautiful aqua and amber pattern across its black wings. The wings, split into four large quadrants, had two long, tail-like projections that looked like ribbons fluttering in the air.

In her previous life, she wouldn’t have been able to see these swallowtail butterflies unless she were deep in the forest of some foreign country, but they were quite common in Luducia.

The pattern on the butterfly’s wings reflected the sunlight and

seemed to glow. Amy was completely distracted by them.

“It’s so pretty... Huh?”

The butterfly had flown so high that even Tigger couldn’t jump to it. Amy had looked up to watch it, but a small shadow in the sky had come into view. She observed it, shielding her eyes with a hand, and the shadow silently swooped down straight toward her.

“R-Roodle!”

The snowy owl had a thin cylinder attached to his foot—he carried a letter.

Amy regretfully realized she didn’t have an arm cover for him to perch on. She waved her arms exaggeratedly at the sky, and the wise owl seemed to understand her gesture, for he landed on a stone statue a short distance away instead of on her arm.

“Hello, Roodle! Hold on just a second and I’ll bring you a snack.”

After running up to him and brushing his fluffy forehead with a finger, Amy was about to turn around and go to the gardening shed when Roodle hooted pointedly to stop her.

He nudged the tube on his foot with his beak, as if urging her to open it.

“You want me to read it right now?” Amy asked.

All right, then, she thought, taking the tube. Roodle looked pleased by this, gently rubbing his beak against Amy’s hand, which tickled slightly. When she opened the tube, she saw the familiar thin parchment rolled up inside.

If Ed sent a letter, it means he couldn’t come...

Last night, Amy had told her father to tell Edward that she wanted to see him and talk to him. He probably sent this letter to let her know when he’d next be available.

Edward didn’t have school today, either, but he was always busy with something. She hadn’t expected him to find the time to visit on such short notice. But...

Amy was surprised to find herself suddenly feeling a little sad. She immediately admonished herself—it was more than enough that he would respond to her so quickly like this.

As soon as she had taken the letter from him, Roodle had flown off toward his favorite oak tree. Tigger, who had abandoned his pursuit of the butterfly, followed after him and climbed the tree too.

Watching the two of them sitting on the same branch with the

ever-present, perfectly maintained distance between them, the corners of Amy's mouth turned upward in spite of herself.

Roodle and Tigger didn't do anything special together. They didn't even play together.

But whenever Roodle came to the Northland garden, Tigger would come outside too, and whenever Amy took Tigger with her to the riding grounds, Roodle would always fly over to them from the nearby forest.

I wonder if that classifies as a friendship...

"What great buddies..." Amy sighed.

"They really are."

Amy nearly jumped out of her skin in surprise.

She whipped around toward the voice and saw none other than Edward himself.

"E-E-Ed?! Why are you here?"

"Hello, Amy. Why...? Oh, did you not read the letter yet?" Edward smiled as he saw the paper still curled up in Amy's hand. "It seems like I've caught you by surprise!"

She quickly unrolled the paper. It was a brief note simply to let her know he was on his way to visit.

"The roads were empty, so I got here much quicker than I normally would."

"I-I see that."

Amy was so shocked she could barely think straight.

Edward looked slightly concerned. He scrutinized her face and put a hand to her forehead, checking for a fever.

"Are you feeling okay? This was the first time you've said you wanted to talk to me, so I rushed over here, but if you're still feeling unwell..."

"I-I'm okay! I got a little sad when I saw the letter because I thought it meant you weren't going to come, so I'm just a little surprised to see you."

"That made you sad?"

"Um! That's not—I mean—I guess—um—"

What on earth am I blabbing about?!

Amy blushed furiously and slapped a hand over her traitorous mouth. Edward—slightly belatedly—flushed red up to the tops of his ears.

Seeing him blush, Amy couldn't make heads or tails of anything anymore.

“You said that thought made you sad—”

“L-Let’s go talk over there!”

Amy found it hard to navigate her newly realized feelings of love. Despite being interrupted, Edward graciously let the subject drop.

Edward gave a brief signal to Darios, who stood at a distance, and one of the Northland family servants, who seemed to appear out of nowhere, and then he and Amy made their way toward the gazebo.

Even though Edward had come all this way to see her, they couldn’t just leisurely enjoy each other’s company. Amy got right down to business as soon as they sat on the gazebo bench.

“Do you remember at the tournament, when I went to your waiting room before the team matches began? Well, after that, I was trying to get back to the first aid room when I happened to come across Her Majesty the Queen.”

Amy continued to explain how, although the queen was supposed to walk past her, she stopped in front of her for some reason, as if she knew her. Then, she gave Amy a ring.

“A ring?” Edward asked, sounding surprised.

“Yes. Finn told me it was probably a proof of recognition for me as a healing magician.”

“Yes, I’ve heard there were such things, but...”

Amy took off the pendant necklace that she always wore around her neck and removed the ring from the chain. Carefully holding the softly glimmering gold ring, she placed it in Edward’s open hand.

Edward inspected it closely, and then his eyes widened in surprise.

“Yes... This is definitely a royal crest.”

Amy hadn’t realized it before, but it wasn’t just a royal crest—it was the queen’s official coat of arms. With that ring, not only could she go to the Grand Bookshelf and Greenhouse One, but all areas of the castle were open to her...even the private wings of the palace exclusively for members of the royal family.

It was far too magnificent a treasure to be given to a healing magician as a proof of recognition.

Edward would have never imagined that the queen, who very likely only thought of him as the “Third Prince,” would give something like this to his fiancée candidate. But the queen could

not have removed the ring from her own finger and given it to someone else without knowing the significance of that coat of arms...

Only members of the royal family have rings like this. For her to personally give it to someone, then that would mean...

Edward stared at the ring's engraving with a torn expression. Amy moved her head a little closer to get a better look, and then gently pointed to the underside of the coat of arms.

"Ed, look at the inside of the ring."

"The inside? Here?" Balancing the ring between his fingers, Edward brought it up to his eyes and moved it around. "There's very tiny letters engraved here... Huh?"

The tiny engraving jumped out at him, and once its significance sunk in, Edward found he couldn't speak.

"This ring..." said Amy. "The queen must have worn it every day. Probably for many years."

There were tiny scratches on the surface of the ring, meaning she had probably worn it daily, not just as ceremonial decoration. Amy realized that the engraving on the smooth metal inside the ring wasn't words—it was a name and some numbers.

Edward's name and four numbers representing a date.

"This is..." Edward managed to say.

"It's your birthday, Ed."

The king and queen had always kept their son, the Third Prince, at arm's length to preserve the kingdom's political stability. Even though they lived in the same palace, ever since Edward was little, they only saw each other on official occasions and barely spoke to each other at all.

Edward understood that these measures were necessary.

But deep down, he wished things didn't have to be that way. And maybe...the queen and king wished the same.

She must have kissed it good morning and good night every day, in place of the son she could only watch from afar.

Edward had frozen in place, the ring still held up to his eye. Amy took his hand, once again pressed the ring firmly against his palm, and closed his fingers around it. He could feel the warmth of the ring in his hand, although that was probably the heat it had absorbed from where it had lain on Amy's chest.

Edward's gray eyes wandered around so rapidly, it almost looked like they were shaking. Amy firmly held his gaze with her

own gold eyes and smiled faintly.

“I think she really wanted to give this ring to you, Ed.”

It wasn't the right size to fit Amy's tiny hands, but it would probably fit Edward's finger perfectly.

Edward didn't respond. He gently pressed the hand holding the ring against his forehead.

The only person who could understand how it felt wearing a ring engraved with the name of the son she couldn't see—and the reason for entrusting it to Amy—was the queen herself.

After a while, Edward brought his hand back down and opened his fingers.

“...You have it, Amy.”

“Really? Me?”

“I want you to,” he said, putting the ring on Amy's finger.

Amy's cheeks flushed at how similar the motion felt to a pretend wedding ceremony, but the ring was too big and swung loosely around her finger anticlimactically. Amy and Edward looked up at each other.

They both started laughing, neither sure which one cracked first.

“Can I put it on my necklace with your pendant?” Amy asked.

“Sure. I'll be giving you a ring that's perfect for you, anyway.”

“E-Ed!”

At nearly the same moment Amy's heart pounded so loudly she could hear it in her ears, Edward swooped down and planted a kiss over the loose ring on her finger.

Amy's whole body blushed a deeper shade of crimson and her lips trembled. Edward simply smiled even wider.

Epilogue: Afterwards and After That

SIX months had passed since the post-tournament celebration where Edward and Amy's engagement had been suddenly and unexpectedly announced.

Their engagement ceremony was held at a church in the heart of the royal capital.

Many nobles tended to have simpler engagement ceremonies than their actual wedding ceremonies, but that was not the case for nobles marrying into the royal family. As the Earl of Northland claimed, they actually did need quite a bit of time for preparations after all.

But that was nothing compared to the wait for Edward and Amy's actual wedding—it wouldn't be held for three years, at least.

People started to wonder just how grand their wedding ceremony would be, but the real reason for the delay had little to do with wedding preparations.

"You're taking your sweet time to get married, aren't you?" Letty sighed. "Well, I can't exactly say it's out of character."

"Letty!" Amy whined.

"It's a compliment! For how enthusiastically you're preparing," Letizia argued, but her voice sounded upset, and her eyes were glued to the engagement ring that fit perfectly around Amy's finger.

"Don't worry about it, Amy," Rosalind interjected, giving her friends a fond smile. "Letty's just sad that she has to wait three years before you can come visit her in Bakr."

"Rosalind! Th-Th-That's not—"

"You're right. I'm sorry, Letty."

"Amy! That's— I didn't say anything about being sad!"

Letizia's cheeks blushed furiously in protest, and Amy took her hand and held it tightly.

"I'll be sad," she said.

"I will, too," said Rosalind. When she put her own hand on top of Amy's, Letizia finally gave in.

"Y-You two, ganging up on me... That's not fair!"

The three girls brought their heads so close together their foreheads were almost touching, and they suddenly all started laughing together.

They were sitting in Amy's bedroom. When the engagement ceremony at the solemn church had finished, they had all returned to the Earl of Northland's estate for the reception party.

Amy had been down at the party with Edward until a short while ago, greeting the guests and dancing, but when Alexander had snagged Edward away from her, Amy, Rosalind, and Letizia used that chance to take a short break upstairs.

Tigger, who had been cooped up in her room since she left that morning, had gotten very tired of waiting for her return, so he had not left Amy's lap the entire time they had sat down for tea. They were now on their second helping.

The dress Amy was wearing was made of slightly stretchy fabric and only decorated at the hem, so as long as Tigger kept his claws retracted, Amy could hold him without messing it up.

Amy was still as chubby as she'd always been, but the royal seamstress Edward arranged to make the dress was incredibly talented. The lustrous, off-white fabric draped down her body elegantly and suited her figure and coloring perfectly.

Amy stroked Tigger's long, fluffy fur, but her face looked a little tired from the constant baseline of stress from the day. But in greater measure, she looked cheerful and happy—like a young woman that had gotten engaged purely for love.

"...Normally, you know, people get married the year after their engagement ceremony. *Three* years is unthinkable!"

Letizia must have felt very strongly about the matter to bring it up again after having retracted it once before already. But Amy sensed loneliness rather than frustration behind her grumbling. Her heart wrenched in sympathy, and she spoke to Letizia with a look of concern.

"It's because I've never learned anything about royal life before, Letty. Her Highness the Princess has been studying these things since she was little... There's just no way I could learn everything I needed to in a year."

There were plans for Edward to be bestowed with a newly created dukedom in the future, but for now, Amy was marrying the Third Prince.

For many years, Amy had just been a "fiancée candidate." But

because she had never gone beyond a “candidate” until recently, she had never learned the customs or unique etiquette required of the royal family.

It was very unlikely that Amy could carry out official duties adequately in her current state, so she had to learn it all from scratch.

“But you won’t even be the crown princess,” said Letizia, “so you don’t really need to learn three years’ worth of the ins-and-outs of royal life, do you?”

“That’s true, but...”

“But the veterinarians in town rely on her so much,” Rosalind jumped in on Amy’s behalf. “They’d really struggle if Amy suddenly quit, so she doesn’t really have a choice.”

After Amy had talked to Edward and her parents, they decided that she did not have to stop helping the local veterinarians or Sir Dion. They didn’t want to overload her with studying official royal duties, either. So if Amy were to continue her normal lifestyle with the extra lessons added on, it would inevitably take some time to learn it all.

In three years, Amy would be eighteen years old.

Although she was at the late end of the so-called “marriageable age” in Luducia, Amy still thought she was too young. Both she and her father wanted her to turn eighteen before marriage.

“Your father and fiancé are very generous with you,” said Letizia.

“Well, that’s true...” Rosalind admitted.

“Even you would betray me, Rosalind?!”

It was not the first time they had talked about Amy’s long engagement period—they had talked about it several times before—but the wait must have seemed so unbearably long to Letizia that she felt compelled to bring it up again and again.

“Maybe I can somehow postpone my own departure to Bakr,” Letizia mumbled.

Amy and Rosalind shared a surreptitious glance. From what they had seen of Jahal, that would probably be impossible.

But Letizia’s departure was still a long way off, as well.

The three girls changed gears and started talking about happier matters—like the outing they were planning for the following week.

Just as they started chatting about which shops they would go to and where they would eat, there was a knock at the door.

Isabelle slipped into the room, looking apologetic that she had to interrupt them.

“Amy, more guests have arrived. Would you mind going down to greet them?”

“Oh! Sure, Mom. Well, I’ll come back to see you again in a little bit, Tigger... Tigger?”

It was like Tigger knew he was being left behind.

Amy tried to stand up, but Tigger put his front paws on her shoulder and desperately clung to her in protest. She felt the same way—she didn’t want to leave him either. She felt her resistance crumble away when he meowed sadly into her ear.

What am I supposed to do?! Amy fretted, tears springing to her eyes.

Letizia and Rosalind looked at each other, equally at a loss.

“Oh, all right,” said Isabelle. “You can just bring Tigger along like that.”

“Huh? But Mom...”

“You take him to the palace riding grounds, don’t you? He’s not exactly a stranger.”

Many of the guests at the reception were members of the Cat Club, including its founder, the Duchess of Coverdale. There were also owners of animals whose injuries Amy had healed in the past and caretakers from the royal riding grounds, so naturally, nearly everyone was already aware of how close Amy and Tigger were.

It was just as Isabelle had said—he wasn’t exactly a stranger.

“It doesn’t matter to me if you bring him,” came a voice from behind Isabelle.

“Ed!” Amy cried when he popped into view. She could even see Alexander and Jahal piling in behind him.

“Plus, if you’re holding Tigger, that will probably stop other guys from asking you to dance.”

“So that’s why...”

“Alec and Jahal behaved themselves, but everyone else was hopeless. At least everyone’s tired now.”

“Amy, I know you’re engaged to this guy,” said Jahal, “but it looks like he’s going to be a pain in the butt down the road. It’s still not too late to say you’ll come to Bakr!”

After Edward and Amy’s dance, she had danced with a handful

of guys from the Cat Club, which Edward had seemed very nervous about. Amy talked to them during their dances, but only ever about cats.

“Congratulations on your engagement,” the guys would say, “and by the way, my cat so-and-so...”

With each dance, they only talked about cats from beginning to end.

Amy had told Edward this, but he just smiled and shook his head.

“Well...” said Rosalind. “I can see where Prince Edward’s coming from. Right, Letty?”

“It’s so worrying because Amy lacks any self-awareness,” Letizia confirmed. “I mean, come on...”

Amy’s face sparkled with joy not when she was complimented on her dress or hair, but whenever someone complimented her cat. Her smile conveyed only pure kindness, without any hint of darkness or artifice. It touched the hearts of everyone around her.

As Rosalind and Letizia nodded to each other about their friend’s obliviousness, Amy held Tigger with a worried expression.

“Shall we go, Amy?” asked Edward, offering his hand.

“Y-Yes...”

Hesitating only a little bit, Amy took Edward’s hand.

As he helped her up, the pendant locket and ring she wore on a chain under her dress bumped together and made a tiny clinking noise.

Edward casually moved his hand to Amy’s waist to guide her as she held Tigger. Amy had become completely accustomed to walking without seeing her feet—as well as walking alongside such a handsome escort.

As always, Edward looked just like the character from her old video game.

But Amy didn’t feel the same anxiety about it as before. She realized that the reality in front of her eyes was more brilliant and vivid than an image from her memory could ever be.

Most days passed by without her ever thinking about the fact that this was her second life.

But I probably shouldn’t forget it entirely, Amy thought. The present only exists because of the past...because of my past life.

There would probably be times in the future where Amy would falter or feel lost again.

She may even feel shackled by the game again one day.

When they arrived at the reception hall, they were surrounded by crowds of people. Even today, during a celebration centered around her, Amy still wasn't totally comfortable being in front of people.

But with Tigger in her arms and Edward by her side, she looked around and saw her dear friends—Rosalind, Letizia, Alexander...

Her parents, her grandfather, Sir Dion...

Tons of people she had met through animals.

Even Harold and Yasmine were there.

They were all proof of Amy's connection to the reality of this world.

Things will be okay. No... I'll make them okay. I will. On my own.

She readjusted Tigger in her arms, making sure his weight was evenly distributed, and then looked up at Edward again.

His gray eyes smiled gently when he noticed her gaze. He brushed her cheek softly with his fingers.

She pressed her cheek firmly against his palm, like a cat nuzzling affectionately, and their faces drew naturally closer to one another.

Just as Edward's lips were about to touch Amy's cheek, something large and fluffy popped up between them.

"Tigger...What? Oh!"



Suddenly remembering they were standing in front of so many people, Amy turned so red she felt like a melting candle. Tigger, the culprit of the furry interference, didn't look the least bit concerned at all. Edward started petting both of their heads.

The hushed whispers of anticipation surrounding them transformed into shouts of joy, and the party carried on.

Intermission: Brushing

AS a long-haired cat, Tigger had a lot of brushes.

Amy first took a basic, long-tooth comb and briefly combed the length of his body to remove any leaves or debris that had gotten caught in his fur.

Then, she changed to a fine-tooth comb and combed through his entire body again, focusing on working out the tangles in his long hair.

Lastly, Amy went in and brushed him with a cushioned pin brush, which smoothed out his fur while giving him a massage. Tigger really liked when she used that brush around the base of his tail, so she took some time to focus there.

Amy would lift his tail with one hand and brush it with the other. Tigger's bushy tail was so long, she had to stretch as far as she could go to catch the end of his tail and use every one of her muscles to work the brush through it.

After his fur was brushed so carefully, Tigger was so poofy and fluffy he looked like an angora rabbit.

And then I finish by combing my hands through his fur for fun—I mean, to arrange his fur properly!

"So much fur comes out every day," said Joshua, eyes widening at the sheer volume of hair that came off Tigger.

Isabelle laughed. "She could brush him in no time without any fur fallout if she used magic, but Amy wants to do it by hand as much as possible. She says the physical contact helps build their bond."

"It almost looks like yarn, doesn't it? Want to try and make thread out of it?" asked Amy.

"Just looking at it makes my nose sort of..."

"Oh, no! Amy, your father..."

"What? Again?"

Amy stopped petting Tigger and immediately started casting purification magic around the room.

"Dad..." Amy whined, "I *did* ask you not to come in until after

I was done brushing Tigger.”

“I come home early only to be shunned by my dear daughter!” lamented Joshua, seeking comfort from his wife.

At work, the Earl of Northland was the head honcho—the person you’d least want to upset. At home, however, this scene was all too frequent as of late.

Intermission: International Cat Day: A Follow-Up

AT the foot of a mountain range slightly north of the royal capital lay a provincial town buffeted by the dry air carried down from the mountain all year round. One of the defining characteristics of the town was the sheep farms that spanned across the mountainous region. Another was the abundance of mineable ore.

Because there were so few mineable areas in Luducia, a kingdom where natural resources were scarce, government officials from the royal palace would regularly visit the area for inspections. These inspections were usually carried out by civil servants, but on this occasion, the duty fell to Edward, the Third Prince.

The inspection itself followed a process that had become routine and naturally culminated in an informal chat with the supervisor on site.

Nothing outstanding or productive came out of the chat, with both sides mostly rehashing talking points that had been discussed prior, like reminding the other party of certain requests or confirming certain milestones that had been achieved.

“Was that conversation really the whole point of the inspection?” asked Alec, who had accompanied Edward.

“Just the fact that an official from the royal capital came is the important part. What is said in the conversation is...not as important. But it seemed a little different this time because I was the one who came.”

“And you came...for *that*?”

“Well, yes, you’re right... I should probably have a little talk with my older brother about it when I get back.”

Edward and Alexander walked along a street lined with shops, dressed incognito. Edward had already finished everything on his schedule and had a few moments of free time before he was set to return home.

He had guard knights following him, but in the shopping district of such a provincial town, they were actually drawing

attention to themselves. The prince was skilled enough at defending himself, so he kept some distance from his guards and tried to avoid standing out.

He casually strolled through the street, passing by food shops, including a bakery, a vegetable market, a general goods store, and a blacksmith stall. There was even a clothing store.

When they peeked into the bookstore, they saw many technical books on mining—probably for the mining engineers that lived there.

The store clerks spoke animatedly, and the shopping residents looked happy.

“Well, the town seems to be faring well, too,” said Alexander, watching a restaurant crowded with lunch-goers. “The roads aren’t damaged, and the side streets don’t seem too rough.”

Edward nodded.

It was common knowledge that there would be an inspection, but the prince’s visit had not been announced. Everyone simply assumed that an aristocrat had come.

The locale attracted many aristocratic visitors, both domestic and foreign. To the residents, an aristocratic visit was simply a common occurrence.

Feeling so at ease in the town, the two young men walked freely along the streets, chatting with one another.

Along the way, one of the general goods stores stopped them in their tracks. Edward’s attention was drawn to the storefront, which was overflowing with various items made from the town’s local specialty—wool.

“That’s amazing! There’s so much variety!”

There was a great variety of products, from woolen fabrics, knitted products, and rugs, to the wool yarn of various colors.

Edward and Alec had also been shown wool products the day before, at the provincial lord’s manor. These didn’t seem to be as high quality, but the bright colors and rustic feel were unceremoniously charming.

“Hey, Ed... There are a lot of cats in this store, huh?”

“I was just thinking that myself.”

Now inside the store, Edward frequently spotted the owner’s personal cat decorations on display, such as stuffed animals, porcelain statuettes, cards, and paintings. The shopkeeper must have been a huge cat lover.

Edward looked around, reminded of Duchess Coverdale and his fiancée back at the royal capital, and his eye was suddenly caught by a collection of cloth balls of various sizes. He picked one up.

"There are bells inside them," said the shopkeeper casually. "They're very popular toys for young children!"

"They're made of felt, but they were woven to increase durability," one of the clerks said proudly, then, lowering his voice mischievously, added, "but between you and me, my cat *loves* them."

"Then I'll take a large pink one and a small yellow one."

"You're buying them, Ed?"

They had confirmed that the shopkeeper was a cat lover after all. Smirking at Edward's snap decision, Alexander also bought a few of them as presents for his mother's cats and Rosalind's cat.

While they were being wrapped, Edward looked around the store again. His eyes landed on a painting hung prominently on the back wall.

"Wait... That painting..."

At first glance, it just looked like a painting of some cats. But the two boys immediately recognized the model that had been painted.

A cat with long fur striped in golden orange and black was snuggling closely against a black cat with bewitching gold eyes and a red ribbon... Amy may not have been painted as a human, but the picture was clearly Amy and Tigger from Duchess Camilla's Cat Day shenanigans.

But the duchess was supposed to have abandoned her plan to have them painted.

The shopkeeper noticed where they were staring.

"Oho! You boys have good taste! What do you think? Isn't it a wonderful painting? When I look at how much those cats seem to love each other, it makes me feel all warm inside!"

"Right..." said Edward. "The black cat..."

"That's right! It's so cute that the black one is a little chubby. Oh, I'm terribly sorry, but that painting is not for sale. It's just a reproduction, but they're incredibly popular. I only just got my hands on one, myself. Yes, it's true."

"R-Really?"

"It's all for a good cause, too! The proceeds are used to help

fostered cats and sick animals.”

Just then, Alexander looked down at the counter and spotted an informational magazine from the Cat Club.

“Mother...!”



AS soon as Alexander returned home a few days later, he ran to find Duchess Camilla.

“Mother! What happened to your promise not to have that painting made?”

“What, a painting? What are you talking about? I haven’t done anything out of order. This is character assassination!” the duchess chided.

But at the same time, Duchess Camilla, who did not fully comprehend how Alec caught wind of it, quietly muttered to herself behind her folding fan. “I was very careful to keep them out of the public eye in the capital, but I forgot about the provinces...”

“What did you say, Mother?”

“Oh, nothing! Oh! That reminds me, Amy brought over some cookies! She said she made them herself. They’re so yummy. There’s still a few left if you’d like one.”

“...Thank you.”

The duchess chuckled. “Right! Gramps, do prepare some tea, won’t you? Now then, I’ve been invited to Lady Celia’s tea party, so I’ll be off!”

“H-Hey, wait!”

“Can’t stay, I’ll be late!” said Duchess Camilla shamelessly, flying out of the room before Alexander could get another word in.

Alexander’s hand hung outstretched with nowhere to go.

“...Young master,” said the old butler, “the lady’s parents know about the painting, so I don’t believe they have any problem with it.”

“She shouldn’t have done it in the first place!” Alec grumbled.

“Come now, young master, these cookies are quite delicious!”

There was a small sound when the tray of cookies was placed on the table. Alexander stared at them and the steam rising from the teacup for a short while before sighing and slumping down on the sofa.



AROUND that time...

The Duchess of Coverdale's retained painter had been summoned and now found himself standing in the Third Prince's private quarters at the royal palace.

Sometime later, the prince may or may not have been presented with a painting featuring a black cat and a brownish-gold cat...

Intermission: International Cat Day: A Follow-Up, Follow-Up

ALYSSA let Amy into the Third Prince's private quarters. Amy stood idly a few steps away from the door, looking around awkwardly.

"Lady Amy, His Highness will return shortly, so please feel free to take a seat as you wait."

"Oh, right..." said Amy, but she remained standing where she was.

Amy had officially become Edward's fiancée, and he had asked her to stop by his quarters when she came to the royal riding grounds.

Today was the first day she had visited his private quarters, and it seemed as if they had just missed each other. Her hesitation to sit in his room without him present may have just been a lingering feeling of politeness from her previous life, but she did certainly feel awkward.

This is Ed's room...

It was the first time she had ever been in the room of a boy her age, throughout both of her lifetimes.

With it being the royal palace, maids like Alyssa would naturally be stationed in the room as well, but the only other boy's room she had been in was Harold's, so Amy was understandably on edge.

Furniture that looked very old and historic were arranged throughout the huge room, and the walls were decorated with beautiful landscape and historically themed paintings. Amy decided to look at them while she waited.

Starting at one end of the room, she slowly went down, looking at each painting, until she reached the area closest to Edward's desk. He had told her that he didn't have a lot of administrative duties yet, but that desk was probably where he wrote inspection write-ups, reports on his magical tools research, and letters to Amy...

Edward's ink and pen were arranged neatly beside each other,

and there were two rectangular objects decorating the desk, propped up like pictures.

Amy gasped.

“Lady Amy? Did something happen?”

“N-No, Alyssa, it’s nothing!”

The rectangle that caught her eye was a small painting of a dog that looked like a slightly lop-eared shepherd. From the dog’s features, Amy could tell it was probably the dog Edward had when he was quite young.

That painting was great—perfectly fine.

It was the *other* painting next to it that was the problem.

It was a painting of cats... Edward loved animals, so it wasn’t exactly strange that he’d have a painting of a dog as well as a painting of a cat close at hand.

But one of the cats inspired a severe sense of déjà vu in Amy...

Wait... No... Wait, what?!

A chubby, black cat with a red ribbon around its neck was comfortably lying down on a pillow. Gold peeked out from the cat’s blearily opened eyes. The way they were sleepily rubbing them with their front paw was incredibly cute.

A beautiful brownish-gold cat was nestled closely beside the black cat, standing straight and looking down at them. This cat had a silver handkerchief tied around its neck, the same color as its eyes.

Amy suddenly had a flashback to that Cat Day at Alexander’s house, when the Duchess of Coverdale had dressed them in those cat costumes...

I...I’m imagining things...right?

But then, Edward and Alexander *had* worn cat ears that were the same color as their hair on that day...

Yes, those brownish-gold ears...

Even though the painting was indisputably of cats, the gold one vividly reminded her of Edward... It goes without saying that Amy saw herself in the black one.

“Oh, Amy! You came.”

“E-Ed?!” Amy yelped.

Amy held both hands over her mouth to prevent a strange sound from escaping it as Edward walked into the room.

“I’m really sorry. I was suddenly called away. You could have sat down while you waited, you know.”

"I-It's fine... I was just looking at the paintings, and, u-uh..."

Amy was acting a little suspiciously and pointing her finger at something on his desk.

"Hm? Oh...that painting," he said when it came into view. His smile widened. "Cute, isn't it? I had the painter Alec's family hires paint it for me."

"Th-The one Alec's family hires...?!"

That means it's really...!

Amy's head was on the verge of spinning, but Edward looked at her and the painting with unfiltered adoration.

"I'm very productive with my writing when I work here."

"Y-You should...put it away..." Amy stammered, reaching for the painting.

"I can't," he said with a smile, closing his hand around her outstretched one.

Amy, already red and teary-eyed, could for a few moments only open and close her mouth soundlessly.

"B-But—"

"They're just cats, right?"

"...Yeow..."

In Amy's flustered state, her response accidentally came out more like a cat's meow than the "yeah" she had intended.

Edward stammered, unable to speak.

Th-That's not fair! he thought, flushing bright red himself and looking at the ground, only making Amy even more flustered.

Short Story: Tigger, a Kitten, and a Circus

AS Isabelle welcomed her daughter Amy home in the entrance hall one evening, she noticed that Amy was carrying a basket very carefully.

“Welcome home, dear. I’d heard you went straight to Duchess Camilla’s after school to help treat a kitten... You’re looking after it, then?”

“Yes. The poor thing needs constant surveillance.”

A kitten was wrapped up in a towel in the basket, sound asleep.

Isabelle wondered if perhaps it had gotten caught in the morning rain, because although its light-gray fur was dry, it was quite tangled and unkempt. Its eyes were sealed shut from an excess of eye discharge, and its ears seemed unusually pronounced against its thin body. On top of all that, one of its legs was wrapped in bandages.

Isabelle looked at the poor thing commiseratively. It looked so different from how a kitten ought to look.

“It’s so small... Is it a newborn?” asked Isabelle.

“No, she’s probably around two months old.”

“At that size?”

Isabelle was predictably shocked when Amy conveyed the veterinarian’s diagnosis that the kitten’s growth had been stunted due to malnutrition. She probably seemed even smaller to them because they were so used to seeing the exceptionally large Tigger.

One of Duchess Camilla’s regular merchants had found the kitten cowering on the side of the road with a wound on her back leg. She’d immediately been taken to the duchess, and a veterinarian had been called for at once, but he concluded that the kitten’s exhaustion was worse than her injury.

That was why they called Amy in for her healing magic.

“I could only do a little bit of healing, though,” Amy muttered guiltily, looking at the kitten in the basket.

Healing magic only magnified the patient’s own powers of

recovery. If a very frail patient were suddenly filled with massive amounts of magic, there was actually a possibility they could die from the strain on their body, so Amy could only apply the smallest amount of healing magic to the incredibly tiny, weak kitten.

After some medical treatment and healing magic, the kitten had improved a little bit, but she still couldn't open her eyes or drink any milk. Amy and the veterinarian had decided that it would be best if Amy kept an eye on her for a little while and frequently gave her small doses of healing magic.

"Duchess Camilla will be gone for the next two weeks, so I thought I could keep an eye on her here during that time."

"Of course! That won't be a problem at all."

"Oh, Tigger! I'm home! This is Misty."

Tigger had heard her come home and rushed right over. Amy petted him, smiling at both cats.

"She's just a baby. She'll be living with us while she gets better. Will you be nice to her?"

Amy tilted the basket toward him slightly in an effort to make introductions. Tigger brought his face closer, perplexed...and then suddenly lost interest and started rubbing against Amy as usual.

"I should have expected that," Amy said, laughing.

It wasn't uncommon for there to be animosity between older cats and new cats. Amy had been prepared to keep them completely separated, depending on Tigger's reaction, but it seemed like they would get along okay.

He had reacted the same way when Rosalind had brought Portia over. Because Tigger had lived together with so many other cats when he lived at the Duchess Camilla's cat room, he was very tolerant of other cats.

"You're such a nice kitty, Tigger. I love you so much!"

After handing Isabelle the basket with the sleeping Misty, Amy gave Tigger a thorough petting with both hands. He purred back at her happily.



"**AMY?** You look totally haggard. Has that kitten not gotten better yet?" asked Letizia.

"Oh, Letty... The kitten is doing much better, but..."

Amy had been looking after Misty for the past ten days.

She was sitting with Letizia and Rosalind in the school lounge room. It was the first time in a while they had been able to sit down with one another and catch up, but Amy was so exhausted she hadn't even touched her favorite tart yet. Amy's face looked pale and drained—it was no wonder Letizia was concerned.

"Someone as talented as you shouldn't be this worn out from just using healing magic on a kitten," Letizia continued.

"Letty..." Rosalind cut in on Amy's behalf, grinning. "This isn't magic exhaustion—it's sleep deprivation."

Letizia's eyes widened.

"Sleep deprivation?"

That's right, thought Amy.

Thanks to the vet's treatments and Amy's healing magic, the kitten had been able to drink a small amount of milk the day after she took her home. When the Northland family heard Misty's faint purr and weak meow, their chests swelled to the bursting point with emotion.

The day after that, the eye medicine had kicked in, and Misty was able to open her eyes, revealing beautiful eyes that were the typical deep blue color of young kittens.

After Amy decided Misty had regained enough strength for a bath, her freshly clean, soft, light-gray fur shimmered in the light. Misty's own remarkable powers of recovery helped her get back to normal in almost no time, and she transformed into an amazingly cute kitten right before their eyes.

The time we all smiled and watched her innocently bat at Tigger's tail seems like just a fleeting memory now...

Amy looked up, closed her eyes as if the lounge lights were too harsh for her, and put a hand on her forehead.

"Misty gets so hyper in the middle of the night."

Rosalind looked on sympathetically. It seemed like the more the kitten regained her spirits, the more Amy withered away.

"Portia gets quite active at night, too, but Misty's hyperactivity must be on an entirely different level, huh?"

"I thought I was prepared, but I had no idea the circus she would hold every night would be so wild..."

Amy sighed and looked out at the sky, remembering the wild commotion that had become a part of Misty's nightly routine.

Misty, who had been docile and quiet while she was sick,

would spontaneously and wildly dart around the room in the middle of the night or at the crack of dawn.

But she didn't just run around—she also jumped around the room like she was pouncing on invisible prey. Amy called the nightly uproar Misty's Circus.

Misty was so immersed in her pursuit of running wildly all over the room, she would trample over Amy as she slept over and over—she would even pounce on Amy's face.

Cats were predators by nature, but pet cats didn't need to catch prey. Domestic cats would therefore release their pent-up hunting drive at night, their normal period of activity as nocturnal animals.

Tigger was an adult when Amy adopted him, so he was more relaxed at night, but energetic kittens and young cats were often very active at night.

"What about Mimi, Letty?" Amy asked. "Does she run around?"

"She goes with the servants when I sleep, so I don't know what she's like at night."

Amy stared at her, envious of their pampered royal lifestyle. Letizia quietly cleared her throat.

"Why don't you just sleep in another room, then?"

"That's the thing, Letty. Misty loves Tigger so much, she can't stand to be apart from him!"

And Tigger loved Amy so much, he always wanted to sleep right by her side. If Amy had to choose between Tigger or sleep, the answer was obvious—Tigger.

That was why, despite her exhaustion, Amy attended Misty's Circus every night.

"Th-That's tough..." Letizia said.

"Plus, it would be terrible if she got hurt or something going wild at night where I couldn't keep an eye on her. And I really am happy—her nighttime craziness is also evidence she's feeling better, after all."

It may be hard on Amy physically, but she wasn't going to change their sleeping arrangements.

Her friends looked at her with a mixture of support and pity.

"Why don't you have a chiffon cake with your tart?" suggested Rosalind.

"I'll order a hot cocoa for you too, okay?" said Letizia. "Good

luck tonight, Amy.”

Amy swallowed hard.

“You guys... Thank you!”

The outer corners of Amy’s eyes grew warm as she looked at her two friends, who hoped at the very least to cheer her up with delicious treats.



WHEN Amy went home later that day, she steelled herself for the night ahead.

“Shhh! Amy, come over here!” Isabelle immediately hissed at her from the entrance hall.

“Huh? Wh-What is it, Mom?”

After telling Amy not to make a sound, Isabelle led her to the main staircase, one of Tigger’s favorite napping spots. Tigger, unsurprisingly, was tucked into the corner of one of the stairs, his body rising and falling slowly and comfortably in his sleep.

“Look closer,” Isabelle whispered, giggling quietly and pointing at Tigger’s belly.

A small, light-gray furball nestled snugly against the ocean of Tigger’s long, black and orange fur.

Amy held her breath. A sleeping kitten snuggled up against—and nearly swallowed up by—a large cat!

How adorable! How precious!

Amy somehow managed to stifle her voice upon witnessing the scene, which was as angelic as any chapel ceiling painting. With her hands clutched together over her chest, Amy couldn’t take her eyes away from them, totally enchanted.

“It’s— It’s so cute... Now that I’ve seen this, I’ll let you do whatever you want, Misty...! That’s right... You can have as many circus nights as you want!”

“Oh, Amy...” Isabelle said, chuckling.

Unsurprisingly, Amy spent most of that night awake with Misty, who had once again transformed into a savage nocturnal warrior, and she greeted the morning with a huge yawn.

Afterword

WHETHER in novels or movies, I've always loved stories with happy endings.

But occasionally, the fairy tales or folk tales I was fond of as a child didn't end in "And they lived happily ever after..." On those occasions, I would think up my own stories that took place after the unhappy ending.

Even stories that end happily probably have their share of obstacles and hardships in the "after" part of "happily ever after." But the best endings are the ones that make me think that things will always turn out okay for the characters, come what may.

That was what I hoped to write for Amy's story.

This volume was mostly centered around events at school. Even though the focus of Amy's life shifted from her home to the outside world, she was still devoted to animals, and now she's even made some human friends, further expanding her world.

Amy couldn't just stand on the sidelines, either, forever uneasy about her otome game fears, including her relationship with Edward.

Although she may have hesitated, Amy moved forward in her journey one step at a time. And little by little, I grew as a weaver of stories alongside her.

I would like to express my gratitude once again to everyone who has continued to support me in publishing the second volume.

Charis Messier, from Cross Infinite World. All the staff who were involved with editing and translating the book. The illustrator, Hinano Chano, who drew the fantastic book covers and illustrations for both volumes.

All the readers who have supported me.

And to my family, friends, and writing pals, thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Writing can be a challenge, but when I think back on the times I was writing, I was always having fun.

I bring this story to a close with the hopes that you all enjoyed

reading it as much as I did writing it, and that in the future, when you see a cat or owl, you'll smile and think, "Ah, that reminds me..."

-Kosuzu Kobato



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After being dumped by her fiancé and expelled from the kingdom, Laetitia decides to live her life in leisure, cooking for cute and fluffy mythical creatures!



THE WEAKEST MANGA VILLAINESS WANTS HER FREEDOM!

STORY BY: KAZUKI KARASAWA
ILLUSTRATION BY: MASAMI
STANDALONE / OUT NOW

Oh, crud, I just realized that I've been reincarnated into my favorite manga as the first boss defeated by the heroine at the start of the story!



cross infinite world



THE DRAB PRINCESS, THE BLACK CAT, AND THE SATISFYING BREAK-UP

STORY BY: RINO MAYUMI
ILLUSTRATION BY: MACHI
SERIES / VOL 1 OUT NOW

Seren attempts to break off her royal engagement with the help of a black cat familiar—who might actually be a tsundere archmage?!

SURVIVING IN ANOTHER WORLD AS A VILLAINESS FOX GIRL!

STORY BY: RIIA AI
ILLUSTRATION BY: MUCHA
SERIES / AVAILABLE NOW!

Can two reincarnates set aside their differences to save the fox girl twin villainesses in this romantic comedy?!



THE STRONGEST KNIGHT IS ACTUALLY A CROSS- DRESSING NOBLEWOMAN?!

STORY BY: IOTA AIUE
ILLUSTRATION BY: HAKUSEKI
STANDALONE / PRE-ORDER NOW!

Bernstein slays monsters and hearts alike at her all-boys military academy, but what will her friends think when they discover that the strongest knight is actually a woman?!



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